YALI Voices: A natural storyteller airs the facts [audio]

Essan Emile Ako (Kendra Helmer/USAID)

“I was really talkative when I was a child. And I like events,” Essan Emile Ako tells the State Department’s Macon Phillips in a YALI Voices podcast. That helps to explain the passion he has for his work as managing director of Radio Arc-en-ciel, an urban community radio station in Côte d’Ivoire.

He says one of his biggest influences is his grandfather, whose storytelling prowess transcended an inability to read and write due to a life spent in poverty.

“I never realized that maybe communication was something that was directly related to the tales and stories that the old man was telling me. But when you give it a thought, you see that it is a straight line going from the curiosity to learn, to discover, tales, stories that are really interesting, and then going to radio where you have to, yes, write about fact,” Ako said.

Ako’s radio station is especially valuable to his community during Côte d’Ivoire’s elections, which have sometimes been marked by violence. As a nonpartisan media source, “our role is to make sure that population get the right information before making an informed choice,” he said.

Listen to the whole podcast to find out more, including the challenges of sustaining community radio and Ako’s efforts to expand public access to it.

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS (IIP)
“YALI Voices Podcast: Essan Emile Ako”

[MUSIC - GRACE JERRY, "E GO HAPPEN"]

MACON PHILLIPS: Welcome young African leaders. This is the YALI Voices podcast, a place to share some of the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative network. My name’s Macon Phillips, and I’m so glad you have joined us today.
Before we get started, don’t forget to subscribe to the podcast and visit yali.state.gov to stay up to date on all things YALI. My conversation today is with Essan Emile Ako. Essan is an inspiring young leader and popular radio personality in Côte d’Ivoire. He credits his career path to his grandfather, an avid storyteller, who helped raise and heavily influenced him. Essan is especially passionate about promoting free and fair elections in Côte d’Ivoire. He’s also working hard to expand public access to radio programming over the internet.
Now let’s jump right into my interview with Essan Emile Ako.
So welcome, Ako, it’s great to have you here.

ESSAN AKO: Thank you so much, Macon. It’s really great to meet you for the first time. I’ve been receiving mail from you, from the YALI Network, for the great work you have been doing. We are

really grateful, and I'm happy to meet you and to take part in this podcast.

MR. PHILLIPS: Great. Well, it's been a lot of fun. And I apologize for all the emails. We just get really excited, you know.

MR. AKO: Yeah, I know.

MR. PHILLIPS: So you're in radio, and now you're trying to steer your work in radio to support peaceful elections. But let me start a little bit earlier. What was your first memories, your first experience with radio?

MR. AKO: Well, thank you. My very first experience in radio was in May 2008. By then, I was a student of second year at the University of Côte d'Ivoire. And I was just in the barber shop when I heard an advertising on the radio, on local radio, of our district that they are recruiting new program hosts. I had never been into a studio, a radio studio, before. But I just decided to apply because when I was in secondary school, I used to just act like an MC of some ceremonies.
And so I decided to apply, and then I went, I asked for information, what should I bring? They say, you should bring a show proposal. They asked me to present my first program as a test. So I read the story of Nelson Mandela for about five minutes in English. And then some listeners called to say that's really great, we need an English program on that radio station. So you should take this guy. And that's how I started as a talk show host.
MR. PHILLIPS: Now if you had gone back to yourself and secondary school, or even younger, and said, guess what you're going to be doing in a few years, would you have been surprised?

MR. AKO: Well, not really. Not really, because I was really talkative when I was a child. And I like events. Appearing in events and always trying to have my say, trying to contribute. And this was a really part of me. But actually, I really wanted to become a pharmacist. That after I chose that, I don't know exactly why, but maybe I was going to do work in radio, in communication is a really great and fun so far.

MR. PHILLIPS: So you're always talkative, always storytelling. I know you mentioned that your grandfather was a big influence on you in that way. Can you describe that a little bit?

MR. AKO: Exactly. As it goes back to my way early childhood, the '90s. I was born in 1987, and then in 1992 I started going to school. Then I discovered my grandfather, whom I took my father, because I never knew that I had another father somewhere, because my father had divorced with my mother. And then this old man would — could not even walk even, because he was too old, really nurtured me with his own experience, always telling me his stories and tales from our cultural background. And from his experience, what he had done in Côte d'Ivoire, even in the sub-region, in West Africa.
Although he was illiterate, he had traveled, and at that time they used to walk wherever they wanted to go. So they told me to the whole of these stories, and I was so close to him that I couldn't even relate to my age-mates. And then after this, is something like a fish in water, I was to become the future, and what I'm doing now.

MR. PHILLIPS: So walk me through that. Your grandfather, and stories, and that experience really led you to what you're doing now. What do you see in what you're doing now that's connected with, sort of, the values he communicated to you?

MR. AKO: I never realized that maybe communication was something that was directly related to the tales and stories that the old man was telling me. But when you give it a thought, you see that it is a straight line going from the curiosity to learn, to discover, tales, stories that are really interesting, and then going to radio where you have to, yes, write about fact. There are sometimes, also, you have to be imaginative. To imagine things, and then tell their story. So I think that's a whole lot of these have really contributed to what I'm doing now.

MR. PHILLIPS: And so let's talk a little bit more about what you're doing now. So you're not only in radio. You also manage radio. You're in the business of radio, trying to think about how radio can not only be interesting, but can actually be sustainable.
So talk to me a little bit about the challenges of being involved in radio right now in Côte d'Ivoire.

MR. AKO: Well, thank you. Radio is such a great, amazing, interesting business for one to be in. Unfortunately, for community radio stations, the low-end policies around that are not really clear, so there are people in the radio stations that don't have a status. And most of the workers in the community radio stations are volunteers. Volunteers, they are not paid, they just work there for their passion, and then they are obliged to look for money somewhere else.
So this is one of the biggest challenges. There is no clear policy. There are some requirements. For example, a radio station cannot be involved in partisan politics. It is true this avoids using politicians using radio stations to manipulate the people, and to create wars in crises. It's good.
But at the same time, this prevents radio stations from having income and resources, and this prevents our actions on the ground. On the other side, also, we are not allowed to do commercials as a commercial radio stations. So our commercial actions are really limited to about 20 percent of our whole budget.
So if you cannot run adverts to a certain level, you cannot deal with politicians, then our sources of income are really limited. And we have to rely on donors, let's say, NGOs, local NGOs, international NGOs. But the whole of these structures, institutions, have their own agendas, have their own programs. So if what you're doing does not fall into what they want to achieve, or if what they want to achieve does not have a communication component, then radio stations have to just struggle to just live.

But we could do more if the policy was very clear, the staff in the radio station had a clear status, and had a career — where you can have careers in community radio stations.

MR. PHILLIPS: So you describe a challenge. And so now tell me, moving forward, how you're addressing that. What are you planning to do about that?

MR. AKO: Well, in addressing these challenges, you have to be a really creative and imaginative. We live in a community of 1.5 million people. And these area is said to be the poorest urban area in Côte d'Ivoire. So we are confronted by many challenges. In trying to address some of these issues, we may create opportunities.
For example, during the election in Côte d'Ivoire in 2015, the radio stations decided to promote free and fair elections. This was our goal that help when we go into the street, go into communities, and organize with communities so that we come together around the table to discuss the benefits of free and fair elections.
We did not have funds. We wrote some grant proposals, and fortunately for us, we met the USAID office for transition initiatives. They had a program called CT2, Côte d'Ivoire Transition Initiative, so

they decided to just support us. And they gave us a grant of about $48,000 that helped us to promote free and fair elections for eight months.

And also, we tried to create programs that will attract local businesses or sponsors that would help us. So we have our ways to think about the strategies, and to refine our strategies.

MR. PHILLIPS: And so now you're trying to move forward, and use these community radio stations even more to promote free and peaceful elections. Can you walk us through what the future looks like? What are some of the exciting things that you're looking forward to?

MR. AKO: Well, in the coming months, there will be two very important elections in Côte d'Ivoire. The legislative, where we are going to elect our members of the Parliament. And then there will be a referendum about the amendment of our constitution. So these are really great moments.
And if you look at the past story of Côte d'Ivoire, you will see that election time have been times of struggle, times of fighting. So we are going, also, to promote free and fair elections at this local level, and also inform the population about the upcoming referendum. With that being, we don't know exactly what is going to be modified in the constitution. But as a community, as a community radio station, or a community organization, our role is to make sure that population get the right information before making an informed choice.

Then in trying to move forward, there are many challenges, as I mentioned earlier. So in trying to solve some of these challenges, then we could come up with opportunities, grant opportunities, to deal with some more on these problems.

MR. PHILLIPS: And then anytime we talk about the future, and moving forward, inevitably, we talk about the impact of technology, social media. So as someone who's in a medium that historically been pretty basic, you've got the antennas, and radio receivers, and all that, I'm sure that you're also exploring the digital side of your work. Can you talk a little about the intersection of technology and the current business you're doing with community radio?

MR. AKO: Well, yeah. The development of technology, in the beginning, some of our elders, in radio and television, saw it as a competition between internet, and the radio, and television. But our generation, we are fortunate enough to learn that the internet is not coming to compete against to the radios, that we can use internet to further reach a larger audience.

So we, in the recent past, we built a website, and then we tried to broadcast, live-streaming online, just for us to have a broader audience. Because one thing about community radio stations in Côte d'Ivoire is that their reach is limited. There is a regulation that we should not go beyond, sometimes, 10-kilometer radius, or 60-kilometer radius, like in our case.

But with the internet, there's no limit. You can have it everywhere. So it's really fantastic and wonderful. Once we finished our website, the problem we were confronted with was, in fact, two problems. The cost of internet, and how quick internet is. So these two problems prevented ourselves from being really streaming online. So after that we took our website down.

But our project is not done. We are learning ways to continue that. But we have a presence on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, and we even intend to be build a mobile app, application, for young people to be able to receive our radio station and some of the recorded programs on the

mobile phones.

MR. PHILLIPS: OK. So we'll wrap it up with three questions we like to ask everyone just to kind of see what the different answers. So you're someone who's been in radio for a while, focused on elections, really got it all put together. What's something about you that would surprise people?

MR. AKO: That's a question, but let me just try to say that I come from a very poor family. Poor, but have always said you don't need to be a billionaire to be happy. Although I was poor, my grandfather was poor, my family was better. I was not unhappy when I was a child, because of the love that I was in need, I got it from my grandfather and from my mother, also.

And so when I started going to school, I was fortunate to have my stepfather taking up all the charges for my education. And then when I went to a secondary school myself, I started having some problems. So while I was in secondary school, we tried to go to work in farms just to have yams, some cassava, some bananas. And sometimes some money for us to continue our education.

And this continued to when I entered university, where I used to sell booklets. I was out of the classrooms while my mates were in the classroom. Following courses, I was outside, and I was selling English-speaking booklets. So I used to do sell these, and by the end of the day, I could have up to $10. That's enough for me for the week.

And then for the courses, once my mates come from the classroom, I used the courses, I made a photocopy, and I'd read through. And once I have a topic, I go online, on the internet, I bring some courses about this course that have been done because I did not have explanation of a teacher. And at the end of the day, I succeeded to pass all my credits up to the master.

MR. PHILLIPS: Man, that's amazing. So you would be outside selling these little books for next to nothing, make $10 worth of money out of it —

MR. AKO: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: Find your friends. Photocopy their notes. Study that. Go online. Watch the courses on the topic. And then still pass the test.

MR. AKO: Exactly, exactly. Yes, this is what I did. And I did it for almost five years, when I was at university.

MR. PHILLIPS: Sounds to me like whatever you put your mind to, you're going to figure out. It seems that it's pretty impressive. So let me ask another question, then.

MR. AKO: Ok.

MR. PHILLIPS: Are you a morning person, or are you a night owl?

MR. AKO: Yes, I mostly work better in the night. So I can stay up in the night, up to maybe 3 o'clock, 3 AM, working. But in the morning, it's really difficult for me to wake up and work. So yes, when I wake up, I have to do some sport, wash, then go to where I'm going. But I really stay late in the night.

MR. PHILLIPS: OK, that's great. My final question is if you could ask Barack Obama a question,

what would your question for him be.

MR. AKO: You know when you look up the story of President Obama, some to 20 years ago, he went to Kenya where he was met only by his sister at the airport. And we saw the pictures where his grandmother was living, and we even saw pictures of him carrying a bag in all of this.
And then, 20 years later, the same person goes back to the same country, but this time it's not only his sister who came to meet him, but the head of state, the whole people, and even the whole Africa, came to meet him. Then my question is, what are the three most important principles that guided him from that time where his sister only met him, up to this time, where he cannot go anywhere unnoticed. This is my question to President Obama.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's a great question. And within that question, I think you make some really important points. And certainly one of them is that he has received quite a lot of support from people across Africa, including a lot of young leaders. And I think that's part of what makes YALI so special, is it's certainly a relationship between President Obama, but the United States generally, and young leaders across Africa, like you.
And I really appreciate you making time to share your story with us today.

MR. AKO: Thank you so much.

MR. PHILLIPS: I want to thank everyone from YALI, YALI Network, for tuning in today. And we will be back with another interview soon. Thanks, everyone. Have a great day.

Essan's an incredible example of the power of perseverance. There's no doubt he's put the work in to achieve his goals and succeed. Thank you to Essan for sharing your story with us. If you'd like to get in touch with him, you can find them on Facebook under Essan Emile Ako. That's E-S-S-A-N E-M-I-L-E A-K-O.
He's also on Twitter. His handle there is @seniorako. Get ready for my French pronunciation. His radio station is Radio Arc-en-ciel, and can be found on Facebook, as well. That's A-R-C E-N C-I-E-L.

Be sure to come back for more inspiring stories from young African leaders on the YALI Voices podcast. Join the YALI Network at yali.state.gov, and be part of something bigger.

Our theme music is "E Go Happen" by Grace Jerry, produced by the Presidential Precinct. The YALI Voices podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State, and is part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. Government. Thanks, everyone.

YALI Voices: Once a rural villager, he now helps businesses get started [audio]

Alieu Jallow (Courtesy photo)

Alieu Jallow enjoyed the setting and simplicity of growing up in a remote north Gambian village, but he did not like the poverty he experienced, or the difficulty of finding good job opportunities.

Speaking in a YALI Voices podcast with the State Department's Macon Phillips, Jallow said he earned a small amount of money on weekends to help his parents, and those modest earnings ended up sparking an interest in business.

Now he is the founder of The Gambia's first business incubation center, Startup Incubator Gambia, which trains young entrepreneurs in sectors ranging from agriculture to fashion to renewable energy. He also helps them network with potential investors, social entrepreneurs and government officials.

In the podcast, Jallow explains why most startup businesses fail within the first five years of operation. With his group, "we want to mitigate this by providing them with office space, co-working space, so that they can reduce their rent cost rate. And we also provide them with advisory services, with the mentorship and networking and stuff. That we do."

Listen to the whole podcast to find out other projects Jallow is working on — and what it was like to grow up without a television set.

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
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"YALI Voices Podcast: Alieu Jallow"

MACON PHILLIPS: Welcome, young African leaders. This is the YALI Voices podcast, a place to share some of the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network. My name is Macon Phillips, and I'm so glad you've joined us today. Before we get started, don't forget to subscribe to the podcast and visit yali.state.gov to stay up-to-date on all things YALI. For all you out there listening who might live in a small town, perhaps with limited resources for opportunities, wondering how you can make it, this episode of YALI Voices is for you. Alieu Jallow is a young leader and successful entrepreneur from The Gambia. Alieu's life story is truly inspiring. He grew up in a small rural town in the north of The Gambia with 25 siblings. All of his free time was spent working to provide for his family. At age 12, he had to leave his town and enter a city for the first time his life. Through the hard times, Alieu remained focused, his determination never wavering from his goal to improve the life of his mother and his family. Today, Alieu is a successful entrepreneur. He runs The Gambia's first startup incubator, where he mentors young business leaders and helps them navigate the often treacherous task of starting a business. Here is my interview with Alieu Jallow. Alieu, it's great to have you here.

ALIEU JALLOW: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

MR. PHILLIPS: And we're looking forward to talking about what you're up to in The Gambia, what your life's been about so far, and sort of what you're looking forward to in terms of the future for your projects. And I want to start by just saying The Gambia, I think, is a place that a lot of people

don’t know a lot about. And so, paint a picture of what life is like for you every day in The Gambia.
MR. JALLOW: Yeah, basically, The Gambia is — it’s a beautiful country. We are endowed with a lot of people, like the population is not very much compared to other countries. One of the things that I love most about Gambia, because the people itself, they’re very friendly. And on a daily basis, you have people went to the markets, and some go to the farm. It was really interesting, growing up in the rural areas because we do not have the opportunities like having TVs and all the stuff. So, basically, what we do is — daily routine was going to school, from school we’re going back to the farm. And at night, especially when the moonlight is on, we’ll go at night, play around in the town and stuff like that. So it was really fun growing up in a rural area.

MR. PHILLIPS: You had no television growing up.

MR. JALLOW: Yes. No television.

MR. PHILLIPS: So when was the first time you saw television?

MR. JALLOW: My first time that I saw television was almost — I think I was around 12, 13 years.

MR. PHILLIPS: What’d you think?

MR. JALLOW: When one of, I think a family member, relative, traveled to the U.S. and bought a TV, a black-and-white TV. And we all ran to the TV and just sat down. And just started watching and seeing people. It was like, wow, look at him. Like, we were thinking if we can touch the guy and stuff. So it was really fun.

MR. PHILLIPS: Do you remember what was on the television?

MR. JALLOW: I can’t remember really. But I remember the first one that I watched was a football match. That day, I think, that was Senegal and something playing. So there was a football match, so the whole village like — the house was full, so they had to remove the TV from the house and put it outside so that everybody can watch. So it was really interesting. That was the only TV we had in the village at the time, so —

MR. PHILLIPS: So when did you figure out that you wanted to leave the village and come into the city and sort of set your course?

MR. JALLOW: Yeah. I think it wasn’t like personally figuring out. It was a time that I studied, and I was going to school. And I was like pretty much smart student, doing well in primary school. But after I finished my primary school — so our village do, we only had a primary school and then I have to go for a junior school. So I have to move from my village to another village, and do that. So at the time, my parents were like, OK, you have to go to this particular village. Suwareh Kunda with a different ethnics group, a different people, a different lifestyle. And during that time was also another experience, an interesting experience, because I have to learn their language. I have to learn to eat their foods. I had to learn to understand their culture. So it was really an eye opening for me at that age. So I had to move from there. That’s the time I left the entire region of North Bank, and come to the city. That’s when I finished my grade 9 exams. So I moved into the city. So it was nice.

MR. PHILLIPS: And what was the transition like coming from country to the city?

MR. JALLOW: So my expectation of the city was way different from what I find. What I found in the city was like — I thought the city was all nice and rosy. Like you have all the street light and stuff that we saw on TV. Remember, we had a TV in the village. So we saw all these nice streetlights and stuff. I was like, wow, I want to be in this place. But when I get to the city, I realize that there's not much difference. Well, the only difference was I think they had a — electricity was there. Like, you didn't have to go to schools. You get taxis and cars and all over — because growing up in a village, you didn't have a lot of cars, once in a while.

And as a kid, we used to be very funny when a car passed by. We look at the model, and we'll go and take a carton and start to make the car. And say, oh, this is my car. When I grow, I'm going to drive this kind of car, something like that. So those are the kinds of things we would do.

MR. PHILLIPS: But now you grown up, and you're focusing on business and startups and that sort of thing. So how did you go from being a kid that was watching cars and making cartons out in the country to come in the city and really decided to start building things?

MR. JALLOW: Yeah, I think my passion was, initially, it was in — my first thing was I'd grown up in a family of over 25 siblings. And we struggled for the few resources that our parents had. So my mom, who didn't go to school, has to shoulder the responsibility of sending me to school. So I watch her go to — buy mangoes and buy stuff and selling it in the village with the little money she has to be able to give me lunch, to go to school, to be able to give me books, to buy books, and stuff like that. So she was doing this petty trading and family activities. So during my weekends and holidays, I'll go out and help her to make sure that she has enough capital to — my only desire, other than, was to lift my parents, my mother especially, from that condition. To make sure that we have food, we don't have to go to school thinking, what are we going to do to put food on the table the next day. But going to school will realize that when I come back home, there will be food, mom will be happy, and don't worry about stuff. So I really wanted to lift my parents from that condition at the time. That was my motivation. So coming to the city, especially, I think, going to the university, one of the things I did was — I was still interested. I remember when I moved from the village to the city because of my grades and because I was like a one mark away from the pass mark. So I literally didn't pass the exams of the transfer. Because of the education systems were different. The village didn't have proper teachers, and books and everything. We didn't have like all of these opportunities. But when I came into the city, I spent almost two months to three months not going to school. So my guardian, the one that was taking care of me, was selling, and the — I remember helping him sell. Let's go. We will go to the market. And he will also sell. And stuff like that. So I would help him sell and stuff like keep records on what he's doing. And I remember on weekends, we have like a donkey cart where we will go around and go by, pick up stuff. And people would pay us to do that. So I used to have some small money from that. That sparked my interest in business. And seeing then I wanted to do something. With all the small money I was getting, even while I was going to school, I was taking it, sending something to my parents.

MR. PHILLIPS: So you came into the village. You're now in the city, and focused on incubators and businesses. In some way, taking the energy from your time selling things off a donkey cart. But now trying to look at businesses that are little bit bigger, a little bit more profitable, hopefully.

MR. JALLOW: Sure.

MR. PHILLIPS: So tell us a little bit about the work you're doing now.

MR. JALLOW: Currently the work I'm doing, it's — we're supporting entrepreneurs. We've set up the first business incubation center in Gambia, which we bring young entrepreneurs from various sectors, from agriculture, to fashion, to renewable energy, to all these sectors. So the first batch, we've trained over 20 entrepreneurs. And we don't only train them, we provide them with access to mentors. We also provide them with access to networks. We also provide them with a little access to finance in some instance. So, basically, one of the things that we do is a six months incubation program that these young entrepreneurs apply to come into, to be able to learn entrepreneur skills and get the network that they need to grow their businesses. And part of the things that we also do at the Young Entrepreneurs Association is to provide a networking opportunity for all these young entrepreneurs. So on a monthly basis, almost every month, last Friday of the month, we organize a networking event where we invite all members from different industries — from social entrepreneurs to government officials to diplomat, and everybody, just to come to network together and see how best they can share ideas and also create a new network.

MR. PHILLIPS: And what are some of the challenges that face businesses trying to get going in The Gambia?

MR. JALLOW: Pretty much a lot. Because that's why we set up the incubation center with a co-working space. One of the key challenges is most of the startups, when they're just starting up, they have a lot of overhead costs, in terms of high, expensive rents. And also tax rates are very high. And one of the, also, the key things that they also have, the inexperience that they have in running, actually, those businesses. People will have just ideas or see a friend set up something, and they just want to set up the same thing. But they don't know that they have to be innovative. They have to solve a problem when they're trying to set up a business, not only this would be customer driven, but not only because you want to set up something. So these are all key things that most of these businesses will fail probably in the first five years of operation in The Gambia. So we want to mitigate this by providing them with office space, co-working space, so that they can reduce their rent cost rate. And we also provide them with advisory services, with the mentorship and networking and stuff. That we do.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's great.

MR. JALLOW: So these are also key things. And when it comes to access to finances, is also a huge challenge for startups because they don't have access to finance. We have interest rate over 27 percent. And it's a no-no for startups because the banks, conventional banks, think startups are risky, so they're not giving them loans, because they don't know the startup, the likelihood for it to fail. It's very hard. So these are some of the challenges that these young entrepreneurs are facing.

MR. PHILLIPS: So can you tell me, in terms of how you're trying to rise up to those challenges and address them, some of the different strategies you have to encourage more investment in capital or other types of things?

MR. JALLOW: Yes. Some of the plans we have, currently we're working on a young entrepreneurship summit in Gambia which we are already working on, to bring stakeholders together, to be able to push up to making sure the current policy that is there on entrepreneurship inculcates access to

finance for these young entrepreneurs. And most especially, one of the things that we're working on is to see how best we can get like a mutual fund for these young entrepreneurs. A fund that entrepreneurs can compete with some of their business ideas, and then they can get access to these funds to be able to implement this. But we are not only going to give out the funds, but we were able to help them with — providing them with mentorship, because I think it's very key as they learn and grow from their businesses. And the other thing that we also are working on, it's to make sure — most of them like there's many people didn't take business as a career. They think of it as a second opportunity. They're taking it like a fallback, like a Plan B, like it's not their Plan A. It's not something that they go out of university and want to be. It's something that, you know, they — if I don't have a job, then I can get my uncle to give me $200 or $100 to start selling some stuff. But not like, oh, if I finish university, I want to be an entrepreneur. And this is what I want to do, this is the area, there's a problem I want to solve in my community. So one of the things we're doing is, I do a lot of talks and inspirational speech on entrepreneurship at universities to try to encourage, inculcate the spirit of entrepreneurship among the students. One of the things is our education system has not been preparing us — especially in Gambia — it's not preparing us to be entrepreneurs. They're preparing us to be employees, and not to be creative. You have a specific syllabus. You do specific things, and you have to pass the grade exams to be able to move on in life or get a job and stuff like that. That's a challenge. And what other things we're doing currently, we've already started piloting with five schools to be able to inculcate the spirit of enterprise by having entrepreneurship clubs in these schools, to try to see how best we can encourage them to listen to experienced entrepreneurs to inspire them. That took — I was a Gambian, this is where I was born, and this is where I started, and here is where I am today. And it's OK to be an entrepreneur, and you can be successful being an entrepreneur, and it is possible. So we also want to expose them to all these techniques of business plan writings, and business model canvas, and all these opportunities that are available, most especially on the YALI Network with the YALI Learns, on entrepreneurship and things like that. So we — that's the project we are currently planning on working on. We already wrote letters to the schools, and we have a positive response that they will —

MR. PHILLIPS: And you've done some work already with YALI Learns too. So tell us about what you put together there.

MR. JALLOW: Yes. I did some work with the YALI Learns, especially when I just returned back from The Gambia. I was assigned to say, OK, recruitment drive. We should help recruit members to apply for YALI and all the stuff. So I said to the PAO, the public diplomacy officer, hey, I want to go back my community. I want to go back to my village. I want to go back to my people. And I want them to see me like a success story. I was here with them. I lived with them. I grew with them. And this is where I am today. That they can also be the same place or even better than where I am.

So I went in there, and we organized — I was able to do it through a partnership with one of those local organizations. And they mobilized over 60 people in the North Bank region. And I trained with YALI Learns on entrepreneurship. We also trained them on leadership. And we also give them like some exercise on how to develop their business model [canvas] and their ideas. And I also helped them apply for like a demo of the YALI application and what is required and what is expected with some of these things.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's terrific. So are you someone who likes to get up early in the morning and get things done? Or are you someone who typically finds yourself awake late at night?

MR. JALLOW: I typically find myself way awake at night. Yes. I think the best time that I write stuff is at night. So, especially when everybody's sleeping, around 12, 1, I'll be writing a lot of stuff. Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Do you find that there's things you do every day or every week that help you be more organized or help you be more focused on your work?

MR. JALLOW: Yes. One of them is planning myself out, especially when I know if I go to work, I know that, OK, when I go to work today, I have this and this and this to do. So I have like a list of myself that I have. I also have a notepad, also have it back there. That if I have ideas and stuff that I want to do, it's oh, let's write it down. So writing stuff down is always good. Works for me. And one of the things also is that I always plan ahead. Like when I plan ahead, if stuff [gets me by] surprise, I also try to maneuver, but I plan ahead. It gives me more time to prepare and have some thoughts about it.

MR. PHILLIPS: All right. Well, Alieu, it's been great to talk to you. I really appreciate you making time. This is been a great conversation. And I wish you the best of luck back in The Gambia.
MR. JALLOW: All right. Thank you very much. It's been great talking to you too. And shout out to the YALI Network.

MR. PHILLIPS: Absolutely. And I want to thank everyone for tuning in, and have a great day. I had a great time chatting with Alieu. He's proof that no matter your circumstances, you can succeed in life if you have the will and determination to keep pushing forward. Thank you to Alieu for sharing your incredible story with us. If you'd like to get in touch with them, you can find him on Facebook under Alieu Jallow, that's A-L-I-E-U J-A-L-L-O-W. You can check out his organizations, Startup Incubator Gambia, which is at startupincubator.gm. And the Young Entrepreneurship Association at yea.gm. Be sure to come back for more inspiring stories from young African leaders on the YALI Voices podcast. Join the YALI Network at yali.state.gov and be part of something bigger. Our theme music is "E Go Happen" by Grace Jerry, produced by the Presidential Precinct. The YALI Voices podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State and is part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. government. Thanks, everyone.

YALI Voices: A rapper and photographer turns to peace activism [audio]

Cyrus Kawalya (Courtesy photo)

Ugandan-born Cyrus Kawalya sounds a bit coy about his past as an entertainer in the latest YALI Voices Podcast with the State Department's Macon Phillips.

He was once nicknamed "Cyrus the Virus," known for songs like "A Menace to Society." He was also a professional photographer who founded Vision I, an organization that offers workshops to young people who are interested in pursuing a career in film or photography.

But many YALI Network members have also heard of this 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow as the man behind the #IPledgePeaceUg campaign, which many credit with playing a part in the decreased violence around Uganda's elections in February 2015.

What motivated this successful artist to change his focus from the entertainment industry to social advocacy, and transform his routine from being "a late-night person" into someone who now advocates meditation and reading?

Kawalya also discusses how he uses the YALI Network to engage rising leaders across the African continent and challenge them to stand up to corruption. "I'm going to be looking at you. I want to see what you're going to do when you get into that space," he says.

Listen to the full podcast and also find out what he would ask President Obama if given the chance or download this podcast on iTunes by searching for "YALI Network" in the iTunes store.

Don't have access to SoundCloud or iTunes? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

[THEME MUSIC]
THEME SONG: Yes we can, sure we can, change the world.
MACON PHILLIPS: Welcome, young African leaders. This is the YALI Voices Podcast, a place to share some of the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network. My name is Macon Phillips, and I'm so glad you've joined us today. Before we get started, don't forget to subscribe to the podcast, and visit yali.state.gov to stay up to date on all things YALI.
My conversation today is with Cyrus Kawalya. Cyrus is an inspiring young leader whose life has seen its share of twists and turns. In the 1980s, he split his childhood between Kenya and Uganda, even living with his teacher for a time. Cyrus, AKA Cyrus the Virus, made a name for himself in the emerging Ugandan music scene. He then pivoted to a career in high-end film, design and photography, always chasing the next big project.
The irony of accomplishing so much at a young age is that, ultimately, Cyrus felt dissatisfied. He couldn't shake that feeling that he should be using his skills to make a real difference. Determined to spur change, Cyrus used his diverse skill set to start a number of social advocacy campaigns, including I Pledge Peace, which is a campaign aimed at promoting free and fair elections in Uganda that's being adopted by other young leaders across Africa.
Let's jump right into my interview with Cyrus Kawalya. Cyrus, it's great to have you here.
CYRUS KAWALYA: Thank you. Thank you. It's also an honor to be here with you guys today. Especially with the topic that we're dealing with.
MACON PHILLIPS: Yeah, man. We're going to have a good conversation. Cyrus is also known, by the way, as Cyrus the Virus.
CYRUS KAWALYA: AKA, also.
MACON PHILLIPS: AKA Cyrus the Virus, from his time in the music business. You still rapping much, or?
CYRUS KAWALYA: No, I kind of stopped rapping, but still well connected to that part of the industry. I'm still keeping my ties there, because once in a while I need to go back and work with

those guys. Because they're very influential. But yeah, the name has refused to go away. It's still stuck with me. I tried to run away from it. But now, look today, it's even caught up with me in the whole YALI thing.

MACON PHILLIPS: Well, Cyrus calls Uganda home, and we're going to talk a little about what's going on in Uganda, and we're going to talk a little about the projects that he's been working on. But first, let's start at the beginning. Tell us a little about where you were born. I know you were born in Uganda but had to move.

CYRUS KAWALYA: Yes.

MACON PHILLIPS: And then you came back. So walk us through that whole process, or what are your roots?

CYRUS KAWALYA: So I was born in Uganda in 1981, and at about that time, I think, we're having a lot of problems, political problems. It's mostly the time of Obote and Amin, so most of the parents that were living in Uganda needed to find refuge elsewhere. And at that time, also, my dad was having a lot of issues with one of the guys that was in government. He was called Paul Muanga by then.

So we had to move to Nairobi. And then we lived in Nairobi for a while. But then also at the same time, my dad had to also move to England. And he couldn't go with me at that time. I mean, my mom and my dad were being together at different times, and then they're always separate.

So my mom left and came back to Uganda. And then my dad had to go to England. So later on, I was adopted by a Kenyan family. But that family that adopted me was my teacher in pre-primary school. So she told my dad that, you know what? Leave Cyrus here. We'll take care of him if you have to move. And, obviously, then I got into the family. It was very interesting.

In African settings, normally, if you go to like a new family and they've got other children, you'll be treated as a kid from outside. But she had very many children, but still treated me very, very well. And I think I have a lot of good memories from that childhood experience. And then later on, obviously, when my dad came back, and then we had to move back to Uganda in the late '80s.

MACON PHILLIPS: So walk me through the differences between life in Kenya and life in Uganda. What was it like to have spent some of your earliest years in Kenya and then return to Uganda?

CYRUS KAWALYA: First of all, coming back to Uganda was totally new experience, because I went when I was very young, and not yet developed a lot of awareness of my environment. And then the thing is, also, the first languages I learned were foreign languages. I learned Kiswahili, and then I learned Kikuyu because my family in Kenya used to speak Kikuyu. So I had no attachment to my local mother tongue.

I actually think I started learning that about the age of 11. And that was really, it was a bit different because I had the disconnect, like coming back to Uganda and not being able to speak the language. But then because we still spoke English at school and at home, it was OK for me. But not being able to speak the local language was quite a trick. And that's where I felt a bit of the disconnect.

But growing up in Kenya during the time of Moi was also very, very interesting. It was quite an experience.

MACON PHILLIPS: In what way?

CYRUS KAWALYA: I mean, like the school I went to, some of the schools I went to, I remember this is something that doesn't happen a lot like in African schools, is that they used to give us like free milk, free biscuits at school. That memory stayed on for long. And still when I came back to Uganda, I never got to experience that at all. So coming from Kenya was a total contrast from Uganda.

MACON PHILLIPS: But then you finally got your feet under you, learned the language, started

making connections in Uganda. And when did you feel like the lightbulb turned on for you in terms of wanting to pursue the path you're on now?
CYRUS KAWALYA: I think that came a bit much later because I had a little bit of struggles through my teen years, because I was still trying to build a relationship also with my mom. And that can be tricky for very many people. But through my last stages of adolescence is when I actually started feeling that I wanted to do something with my life, that I wanted to make a contribution.
And I think the first step for me was actually music, because then I had gotten also exposed a lot to different Ugandan musicians. And at that time, the industry was beginning to kind of take off. And I had that ride and opportunity of being a part of that whole process. And I think it's through that continued process of engaging that I actually developed the idea that I wanted to do something that was different. I wanted to contribute to my community.
And also being, coming from the background of living as a foreigner in Kenya, it also gave me that feel that when I came back home, I wanted to make a contribution.
MACON PHILLIPS: So what was your connection to the music industry? Were you always a lyricist/rapper type? You play instruments? What did you —
CYRUS KAWALYA: I was a lyricist/rapper. And we used to, I remember one of the biggest artists in Uganda now recorded actually, one of my first songs.
MACON PHILLIPS: And what was that?
CYRUS KAWALYA: It's very funny, but the name of the song was actually "A Menace to Society." And it was kind of, I think, an expression of the feelings that I had for my country at that time. But then as we went on along the way, the melody kind of changed, the lyrics kind of changed, because then I realized that I had to have a positive vibe to drive if I wanted to make a difference.
MACON PHILLIPS: So that was the entry point was the arts. But since then, you've developed this I Pledge Peace.
CYRUS KAWALYA: I Pledge Peace campaign.
MACON PHILLIPS: I Pledge Peace campaign. So how did you move from someone writing "Menace to Society" to running the I Pledge Peace campaign? Were you always someone who paid attention to elections and politics?
CYRUS KAWALYA: I think one thing I've come to agree with myself now that I think I've been trying to run away from is the role of leadership. It's something that has been in me. I've always wanted to do it, but I couldn't figure out how to do it. So over the years, I moved on to do film, design and photography, after the music industry.
I, at some point, I didn't feel so satisfied with what the results were coming out. And at that time, anyway, there was not much you could do with the industry. It was much of hype, much of a name, but it didn't contribute to anything that was concrete. And then when I started doing film and design and photography, I worked still in the same industry. I worked with different artists, different models.
You know, the whole hype of that industry. I worked for one of the best magazines called African Woman, and another one called Zenji. These were like the two best magazines to come out of East Africa. And after chasing that still for a while, it turned out to be, how can I get the next big company? How can I get the next big check? And that wasn't satisfying at all.
And then I had these skills I had developed. So the next idea to me was like, how am I going to use film, design and photography as tools for social advocacy? And it spun around my mind for a while until I actually met somebody who had come from the ILVP Program in the States. And he met me and said, "I've seen some of your work. It looks nice, but have you thought about using it in this

direction?"
And I'm like, you spoke out my mind. So that's when I actually jumped into the whole idea of how do I use these tools.
MACON PHILLIPS: It's not really a new thing, but it's certainly something, in the States, that a lot of people are talking about — particularly new media — the confluence of culture and news. The fact that a lot of people are consuming a lot of entertainment culture, sports culture, arts culture, the different things that normal people do in the normal time. Not everyone's aggressively studying public policy or politics every day. Those are just geeks and crazy people like us, I guess. But most people don't have time for that.
But they do have time every night to watch some television, or go see a show or something like that, listen to some music. And what's happened with new media, digital media, is that it's allowed news organizations to tap into those new audiences. Because those new audiences don't need to buy a paper to get that. They don't need to change the channel to the newscast to get that. And on the other hand, it's allowed celebrities and cultural movers and shakers to actually weigh in on public policy issues. Are you seeing that kind of shift in Uganda?
CYRUS KAWALYA: Yes. It's going to happen. But it will take a little bit of much of an initiative, especially now in regards to the recent elections we had back at home. And one of the debates I actually [had] with most of the artists — because we worked with some artists on the I Pledge Peace video campaign — and I carefully selected those guys for a reason.
I didn't want anybody who had actually participated in what we called "Tubonga Nawe." "Tubonga Nawe" was a music video that was done by Ugandan artists in the name of praising the president. And that kind of came off a bit odd for me, and so many other people who probably have not shared their ideas or said anything about it. But I know it because I've spoken to some of those people.
And they felt that artists should have actually used that opportunity to fight for something that is bigger than themselves, something that is bigger than the check they probably received from the president to do the music video. Or they would have fought for some social issue.
MACON PHILLIPS: They want to do it for the love, not for the money, right?
CYRUS KAWALYA: Exactly.
MACON PHILLIPS: So I guess for people that are listening in and haven't followed the elections in Uganda, I would imagine most people have heard about it one way or another, but obviously there's a lot of news that came out of that. There were some challenges, and then there has been a general election after the primaries. Can you walk us through what the elections were to you, sort of what happened? Just if someone asks you, randomly, "Hey, what was going on with the elections?" And maybe to the context of your I Pledge Peace campaign, and how that came out of the elections.
CYRUS KAWALYA: OK. As the end result, I feel that the elections didn't go the way we really wanted them to go. They were not open and free and fair. And that remains a fact. But what really drove the I Pledge Peace campaign is after we had the primaries in Uganda, violence started erupting around the country. And this kind of shook us a little bit, for people like me who were like, what is going to happen next?
And then, remember, we had the same incident in Kenya in 2008. So now then we started to see that this is what is going to happen to our country. And we were like, what can we do about this? And then we started to design the I Pledge Peace campaign, to kind of deflate the messages of hate and, you know, slow down that whole violent process. That is the key driver of why we set up I Pledge Peace campaign.
And generally I would say it went very, very well, considering that at least we've had some stability

now. But I feel very many people are not satisfied with the results. But like I keep saying to young people that their opportunity is going to come. For people like us who've invested time in what we do in the country, it becomes a bit of a problem if we let the country descend into some form of chaos.

And I always tell young people that look, prepare yourself. Your time is coming. It's more important that you invest in preparing for your time than trying to argue and trying to fight now. Because, to be frank, African leaders, to me, from my perspective, I feel they still have the mentality of tribal chiefs. They're not yet statesmen. It's not yet within their psyche to understand that. It would be, for young people, it's a little bit different. Because for them then, they see the world differently.

I mean, look now, Accra, we're talking with young people from all over the continent. We're planning in ways that Accra can have better elections. That is a whole new dynamic. People like our president have probably not had that chance at our age to be able to deal in something like this. So I know their time will come. No doubt about it. But I just pray that they do prepare for that. So once their chance comes, they're able to, you know, spin off very fast that would have a lasting, positive effect.

MACON PHILLIPS: But ultimately, that we keep violence out of elections. I think that's the thing that's really important to remember is the short-term impact of a loss, even if that loss is unfair or perceived as unfair, is far less than the long-term impact of perpetuating a cycle of violence.

CYRUS KAWALYA: Yes. Yes.

MACON PHILLIPS: And it's why I think what you've done in Uganda is really important. And I've met a lot of other people from YALI that are doing this in one way or another in other countries. And what we saw in Nigeria was certainly remarkable, in terms of that election being peaceful. And you had a peaceful transition of power there that was very welcome.

I wonder if you could comment a little bit about the role of technology and social media in elections, because that was one of the things that people were talking a lot about your campaign, but also the government's response to social media. And just the general environment there around the use of social media. What's been happening in Uganda over the last few years in terms of how that's affecting politics and civic engagement?

CYRUS KAWALYA: I think now social media is also playing a very key role. The ability for new technology and what it can do is really, really amazing. And I think that's why we faced a challenge that they actually had to shut down social media in Uganda. But on the other side, we also use it as a positive tool for peace. We engaged; our social media campaign reached out to about 9.7 million people around the world. And we engaged directly 838,000 people.

So you can see that social media has the possibility to be a very positive tool, or a negative tool, depending on who and how they perceive it. But I don't think it was right to slow down the social media process. But then, I also feel the elements that have also been not using it in a positive way.

MACON PHILLIPS: My reaction to that, not — this isn't specific to Uganda, but I'd love to hear your thoughts on it — is the idea [of] shutting down social media in the United States is something that we couldn't get our head around. You hear that and you're sort of, oh wow, how do you even go about doing that? Part of it is that I get the motivations of people sometimes are positive. They want to avoid violence. They want to avoid chaos.

And so they deny the social media space to people who would use it to perpetuate lies and sort of say things that would incite violence. But it seems like turning off that also creates a lot of mistrust, a lot of angst in society. And so it's one of those where the easy way out in the short term might be to turn it off.

But the harder but more important challenge is to actually be out there earlier with your own

message, and your own clarifying message about where you get the actual results from, what's actually true and not, ways that people can be a more responsible consumer of news. These are not things that are easy to do by any stretch, but it just seems that it's avoiding the easy way out and something that may ultimately backfire.

CYRUS KAWALYA: True. I also think that because there's a little bit, there's no truth in it, that's why they didn't think about using social media as a tool that they could also counter what was going on. And that presents a challenge in itself, because I'll tell you personally, shutting down social media was very, very annoying to a person like me. I didn't think it was necessary.

And just the way you've explained it, the government would have gone out on social media and used the same tool to counter the situation. But I think sometimes when you're doing something that's not right, it's not the thing you're going to think about. And even during the swearing-in ceremony, they still had to shut it down. And well like, for God's sake, why again shut down social on the swearing-in ceremony? Let —

It's also giving people an opportunity not to express so many things that can't be driven in the mainstream media. Because in our country, also mainstream media is very well controlled now. It's a small space. So social media gives opportunity for people to also give a different perspective on things. But I just generally think it's not right at all.

MACON PHILLIPS: One of the things that working at the White House — I worked at the White House before I came to the State Department — that was really remarkable is we had a lot of critics. President Obama has a lot of critics and people who don't agree with his approach. But I always was surprised at just how meaningful it was for critics to be heard. Even if you said to them that I hear you but I don't agree with you, the very fact that you at least give them some voice and they could say their piece meant a lot.

I think over time, ultimately they want those grievances addressed. But even in the short term, stifling that ability, I think, would be really counterproductive. So where do we go from here? Tell me about Uganda for the next few years, and how are you taking what you've learned from the I Pledge Peace campaign and building on that? Where does it take you now?

CYRUS KAWALYA: OK. Through the I Pledge Peace campaign, we realized there was also a challenge of civic education. And I think that's one of the key areas that we want to try and work over the next years. Like engage young people a lot in civic education so they understand their rights. And I think if we did it over the next five years, it would make [a] totally huge difference in the upcoming elections.

But like I say to also many young people back at home, my team, and other people who I've worked with, that I think now is the time to start doing that work. We're not going to wait into the last two, one year towards the election to be able to do something that will become meaningful. We need to kick-start now and engage a lot of youth in civic engagement around the country.

And I realize something that also, in the YALI Network, there's a lot of people back at home that are running for leadership positions, that are actually on the YALI Network. And this I had an experience with when I went somewhere to print some of our work. And one of the guys was running for LC5. LC5 is quite a good position back home.

MACON PHILLIPS: LC5 — what does that mean?

CYRUS KAWALYA: Local Council 5. Like, it's a district level. I don't know how to compare it with a U.S. kind of level. But I found somebody who, the moment he knew who I was from the Fellowship Program, being the president, he got very excited. And he told me a lot of things. And we had a lot of discussions. And I remember one of the questions he was asking was, who are you going to, who are

you supporting?
And I told him point blank, these guys, I feel, are long gone. You're running for LC5. I'm going to be looking at you. I want to see what you're going to do when you get into that space.
MACON PHILLIPS: Next generation of leaders.
CYRUS KAWALYA: Yeah. Are you going to get corrupt? Are you going to get paid off? Or are you going to stand for it. And he was actually very shocked. He looked at me and he actually realized that what I'd told him was very sensible. But then, the fact that he was on the YALI Network and realized how prestigious it was also gave me something to think about. That look, there are many of these young people on the network that are within our country running for these positions. It's time we start to engage them, start to engage with them, see what their ideology is, what do they see their country like.
MACON PHILLIPS: That says a lot. One of the takeaways I have from that is, people will act as seriously as you treat them. I think there's a tendency to look at youth organizations as just a bunch of kids. And you've got to keep them happy and one day they'll turn into this thing. But the truth is, a lot of people are already doing things at a young age.
CYRUS KAWALYA: So many.
MACON PHILLIPS: And that's what YALI is all about. It's not people who want to be leaders. It's young leaders who are doing things that many old leaders aren't doing. I'm 37, so I guess I count as an old leader now. But I meet young leaders all the time that have done more in their lives than I ever will. So it's absolutely true. We have to talk to these people in a serious way and treat them seriously.
Let's wrap this up with a few questions. First off, what's something that typically surprises people about you?
CYRUS KAWALYA: Sometimes people don't expect I'll say the things that I say. Then many people don't know much about my background. So when they get to contrast between my background and who I am today, it's like, oh wow. How possible is that?
MACON PHILLIPS: Do you ever just go off and like drop a verse on them?
CYRUS KAWALYA: Sometimes I do, but I've always tried to keep away from that. But I can't escape —
MACON PHILLIPS: Can't escape Cyrus the Virus, man.
CYRUS KAWALYA: Can't escape the — I used to call myself, actually, C to the V, Cyrus the Virus.
MACON PHILLIPS: I love that.
CYRUS KAWALYA: That is what surprises people a lot. But then again, I also realize it's what has given me the advantage of being very many successful things. Like I Pledge Peace campaign is really because of the background. Once you come from that background, you can take things an extra mile.
MACON PHILLIPS: Put yourself out there and be a creative person.
CYRUS KAWALYA: Exactly. You don't have to do it the conversion way. You get so many dynamics of putting it out.
MACON PHILLIPS: So the next one is, are you someone who loves to wake up early and attack the day? Or are you a late-night operator? A morning person, or a night person?
CYRUS KAWALYA: I played both of those parts in my earlier years. I played the late-night person. In these later years, I'm doing the early-morning person. I practice a lot of meditation. So I really have to get up —
MACON PHILLIPS: That was going to be my next question is, anything you do every day or every week that helps you organize yourself — this is really just kind of advice for other folks listening in

— helps you organize your mind, your work, learn new things, whatever the routines are that you have that you feel has made you more effective.

CYRUS KAWALYA: Meditation and reading. Those are components that have developed over the last five years. And now I do it very regularly. Because I feel it's the only way you can organize yourself and remain focused on certain goals for a longer time. Like because in most cases, many people do something and then jump off it and then do something else. But through meditation and reading, I've kept a very high level of focus, and I continue to do that.

MACON PHILLIPS: Last question. We've been peppering you with questions, but now it's your turn to ask a question, which is, if you could ask Barack Obama a question, what would you want to know?

CYRUS KAWALYA: I want to know what was at the back of his mind when he set up YALI. Because one thing is for sure — and I keep saying this also to people, I think I've said it to guys in the States and I've said it to people back at home — I've told them you're not going to witness the effects of YALI right now. But five, six, 10 years down the road, you're going to realize, oh wow. Because it's such a huge network.

And I've said it before that it has given us also, as Africans, opportunity to get to know each other. I've never been to West Africa. This is my first time to West Africa. And I'm coming here because of the YALI Network. And most of us grow up thinking of two things: I either can make it to Europe or I can make it to the United States. We never grow up thinking of, I need to know my continent very well. I need to engage with people around the continent.

MACON PHILLIPS: That's been one of the things that I've loved the most about the events that I've been to the United States, but certainly when I've traveled in Africa is you get a few Americans that show up at these events and we get up there and say what we're going to say. But the real action is among the young leaders getting to know each other and going out and organizing things themselves and exchanging WhatsApp or email or what have you and staying in touch. And that's ultimately, I think, the real value of YALI is what each of you makes of it.

CYRUS KAWALYA: We have the most beautiful network now on the continent, more than ever in the history, I think, of our continent. And I was telling Teddy at the airport, one of the Fellows we are with on the tech camp, and we both agreed to it. And we said, do you know what it's going to be like five years down the road when some of us become president, some of us become ministers, and we already have this beautiful relationship we've created amongst us? It'll be easy for us to agree on so many things, which probably the older generation can't do that.

So that's the thing I'd like to ask President Obama. What was at the back of his mind when he came up with YALI, because I think it's so, so, so brilliant. It's really now, we can't have any excuse not to do great things out of this. I think he set the pace for us, and now the challenge, and it's on us to what we can go out of this network. But I think it's the greatest thing to have happened to the African continent.

MACON PHILLIPS: Well, Cyrus, I'm going to end it right there, because I couldn't say it any better. And I really appreciate your perspective on all this, and really appreciate your time joining us today.

CYRUS KAWALYA: Thank you. You're welcome. Much love to the YALI Network.

MACON PHILLIPS: All right, YALI Network. So this is wrapping up our interview with Cyrus the Virus. He can't get away from it, but we'll just call him Cyrus today. Make sure you look him up if you are interested in civic engagement. And if you're ever in Uganda, let him know. And we will be back with another interview soon. Have a great day, everyone.

I had a great time chatting with Cyrus. He's clearly a talented guy who really understands the value

of civic engagement and welcomes the opportunities networks like YALI bring. I love his positive vision for the future of Africa. Thanks to Cyrus for sitting down and sharing his story with us. If you'd like to get in touch with him, you can find him on Facebook. Cyrus Kawalya, that's C-Y-R-U-S K-A-W-A-L-Y-A.
And don't forget to take a look at his I Pledge Peace campaign, and his nonprofit organization, Vision I. And if you've got some free time, maybe you can find some Cyrus the Virus deep cuts online. Be sure to come back for more inspiring stories from young African leaders on the YALI Voices Podcast.

Join the YALI Network at yali.state.gov and be part of something bigger.

Our theme music is "E Go Happen" by Grace Jerry, produced by the Presidential Precinct. The YALI Voices Podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State and is part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. government.

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YALI Voices: Social media expert and dancer 'choreographs' her country's elections [audio]

Fatu Ogwuche stands on a
pier in Washington, DC.

"I am Fatu, an elections and technology consultant in Nigeria," Fatu Ogwuche tells the State Department's Macon Phillips in the beginning of a podcast.

That is a modest self-description for the 2015 Mandela Washington Fellow who is dedicating her career to support open, free and fair elections across Africa. Ogwuche uses social media tools she has developed to monitor election irregularities and instantly report them in real time to electoral commissions.

Ogwuche reveals that after gaining a reputation as a troublesome student and great dancer, "I reinvented myself" ahead of Nigeria's 2011 elections when she saw the need to document the way Nigerians were talking about the upcoming vote through social media.

She went on to work with an app designer to create an easy way for voters to find out where they should get their registration cards.

With elections, "one thing we also realized was with more engagement comes more participation," she says.

Ogwuche also talks about how she wrote her own job description and found herself on Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission.

Listen to the full podcast to find out how she is using her new media expertise to increase transparency in African elections.

Don't have access to Sound Cloud? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

THEME SONG: Yes, we can. Sure we can change the world.

MACON PHILLIPS: Greetings, young African leaders. This is the YALI Voices podcast, your home for sharing the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network. I'm Macon Phillips, and I'm so glad you've joined us today. Before we get started, don't forget to subscribe to the podcast and visit yali.state.gov to stay up-to-date on all things YALI. If you like what we're doing here, please take a moment to recommend us to a friend.

Recently, I sat down with Fatu Ogwuche, a Nigerian woman who has dedicated her professional career to support open, free, and fair elections across Africa. During the 2011 Nigerian elections, she and her friend developed new media tools that monitored election irregularities and reported them in real time to the electoral commission. In fact, her tools were so successful, that she was hired as a new media consultant to implement them at Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission.

She now oversees project management, capacity development, and develop strategies for citizen engagement. Having worked in both the private and public sectors, Fatu gives some great advice on how to implement new technologies within civil service. Now let's jump right into this interview with Fatu Ogwuche.

Welcome. It's good to have you here.

FATU OGWUCHE: Thank you. Yeah, I'm excited.

MACON PHILLIPS: So let's just kick things off. When you're out and about and people say, oh, nice to meet you, what do you do, how do you answer that question?

FATU OGWUCHE: I say I am Fatu, an elections and technology consultant in Nigeria.

MACON PHILLIPS: In Nigeria.

FATU OGWUCHE: Yeah.

MACON PHILLIPS: And when we first met, you were just coming out of the 2015 elections. Is that right?

FATU OGWUCHE: Yes.

MACON PHILLIPS: And I have to say, no one really knew how that was going to turn out.

FATU OGWUCHE: Yeah. No one knew. We had many international news stations come into Nigeria

because they thought they were going to cover a civil war shortly after elections. So they were a bit disappointed when they had to leave on seeing Nigeria had peaceful elections.

So really nobody knew. Even I worked directly with the electoral commission over the time when results were actually announced. I didn't know how it was going to go because most people who even watched when they were announcing the results, they could see that some guy from the political party that was leading at the time decided to cause a scuffle.

But our electoral chairman, I think he was pretty chill in that moment. Because if he had matched his anger with anger, then we probably wouldn't even be having this conversation right now.

MACON PHILLIPS: That's right.

FATU OGWUCHE: But here he was wise enough to quell the situation, and we had peaceful elections at the end. So I think everybody was really grateful for that particular moment, because we saw that there was a lot riding on the elections, and tensions were high. So for that quiet and gentle moment from our electoral chairman really changed the course of the elections, yeah.

MACON PHILLIPS: They have the expression back in the States– no news is good news.

FATU OGWUCHE: Yeah.

MACON PHILLIPS: Of course, you got a new president out of the whole deal, but in terms of the election, it was pretty boring, all told, in terms of violence and all of that. So we were really pleased to see that as well. But we'll get to that in a second. I'd like to rewind a little bit. Where did all the elections focus come from? Was Fatu in high school running for student government, trying to figure out the elections and following politics, or were you were pretty active?

FATU OGWUCHE: No. In fact, I have lots of my friends from secondary school. They tell me, what the hell happened? They think that I just disappeared and then came back. I reinvented myself. Because I was really troublesome in school. I cut classes. I had a thing with authority. I was always getting into trouble.

But I think what changed was in 2011. I was just about to graduate from the university. And a friend of mine– we were just getting ready for our 2011 elections then and social media was becoming a big thing in Nigeria. So a friend of mine called me one day and said, they are doing this new project around social media. The social media is new now. Twitter and Facebook were really big in Nigeria then. And we're still exploring it, seeing how we could use it. We're talking about food, lunch, football. And of course, the way Nigerians are, we tend to talk about things as they happen.

So we said elections are coming up. We need to figure out a way to capture and document the way Nigerians are talking about elections. So he told me about it. And I said, OK, yeah. It sounded interesting, and I didn't really have anything to do during the holidays anyway.

So I said, OK. And then what we decided to do is we thought, OK, instead of just doing this in isolation, how about we create escalation path. So if people are talking about administrative challenges on the field, then we have an escalation path to the electoral commission, then we tell them. So it was like 911 situation. We let them know, and then they do something about it. Or if it has to with security violence, whatever it is, then we let the security agencies know. So it was a

collaborative effort.

MACON PHILLIPS: So were you, for the 2011 elections, were you part of the commission? Or you were on the outside–

FATU OGWUCHE: I was on the outside.

MACON PHILLIPS: –trying to get those folks to work with you. And then four years later, you had gone on the inside.

FATU OGWUCHE: Yes.

MACON PHILLIPS: So how did that work? Did you just get to know folks there and then decide that you wanted to try to pursue a job inside of it? When did you choose to try to go from the outside to being part of the inside?

FATU OGWUCHE: OK, so this was after graduation. So by the time we're doing this project, I was just about to graduate. I had just come home for holidays, going to go back to school to finish my exams. So after graduation, I was at home one day, and then this was also after law school. I was at home one day, and Jacqueline Farris, who is the DG of the Yar'Adua Foundation. She called me, and she said, um, so, what are you doing right now? And I'm like, well, I'm just at home, not really doing anything.

MACON PHILLIPS: Just got my law degree, just hanging out.

FATU OGWUCHE: Yeah, just chilling. I mean it just after finals. I wasn't even really thinking about doing anything. I'm just like I need my brain to rest. Then she asked me, OK, yeah, so you've graduated, so you can write. I said, yes, I can write. So she said that, OK, that we're going to develop the concept notes for the electoral commission because there's certain value in what we did. And they wanted to have something permanent like that within in the electoral commission.

So she asked me to write the concept notes, and I did. So when I did that, of course, I needed somebody to be there to establish it. So that was how I got in.

MACON PHILLIPS: So you wrote your own job description, basically.

FATU OGWUCHE: (LAUGHING) Exactly! Yes, I did. I wrote my own job description.

MACON PHILLIPS: That's a good piece of advice for all of you listening out there, who are trying to find a dream job. Just go ahead and write down what that looks like and get someone to buy on it. So that was after that election. So that was in 2012 or so?

FATU OGWUCHE: Yeah, that was in 2012.

MACON PHILLIPS: And so you spent a few years inside the commission before the next big election.

FATU OGWUCHE: Yes.

MACON PHILLIPS: What did you find when you arrived? The reason I ask is one of the things that I hear a lot, and certainly my own experience in government has been, particularly in the digital new

media space, sometimes you get inside the door, and you look around, and you say, oh, boy, we've got a lot of work to do. So did you have to do a lot of education on the inside of what tools were possible and what strategies needed to be implemented?

FATU OGWUCHE: Yes, I did. And, of course, the electoral commission is a civil service. So you can imagine going into a system that was once opaque and people didn't really like to share information, even within the system, because people like to work in silos. So if you're coming and asking them for your information, it's like, OK why are you asking me this? Are you trying to take my job? Are you trying to do my job for me? And then bringing in something like social media into that space, where everything has to be transparent, everything has to be open, you need to give information to the public. That was even a lot tougher than I expected.

But we also had this thing where the departments that were really relevant to information, like voter education department, the ICT department, those particular departments, where we had to actually give information to the public and this information, we had to get it from them. So going to them and telling them, OK, this is what we were doing, telling them the process about trying to get all this information was quite difficult, because they didn't see the value in that.

So it was pretty tough in the beginning. But by the time they started seeing the value that the information we were putting out there for people was bringing to the commission and also to their jobs, then they were more open to it.

MACON PHILLIPS: I know that there's a lot of people that are part YALI that either currently work in some sort of civil service inside the government or want to, but sort of recognize that it's so hard to change. And listen, I work in government, too, in this area. So for all of us, if you could just give one piece of advice based on that experience, which sounds like it was successful in terms of getting people to change how they work and embrace these new technologies, what would you whisper in someone's ear when they're walking in the door on the first day?

FATU OGWUCHE: Be patient, and this is coming from a very impatient person. I think I'm the most impatient person in the world. But I think that's what working with government teaches you, that you have to be patient. Because you go in there, especially if you've done work in the private sector before, and you go in there and you expect things to happen, like that minute. I can't understand why people have to drag their feet. And you also have to understand that there are people within the system that just want to frustrate you. They're like, OK, who is this young person coming and telling me, who's been on the job for 30 years, what I should do.

But, while some people are out there to make your job really hard, by the time you cultivate good relationships– like, for me, also about unfolding my own myth. So I had people tell me, oh, this person and that person and that person, oh, they are the most difficult people. Nobody can work with them. But by the time I got there, I said, OK, look, these people are going to be better as friends of mine than adversaries or anything. So I was able to cultivate those relationships with them. So by the time they knew, OK, she's on our side. Here we have a good cordial working relationship. Then it was easy for things happen. So just be patient and just cultivate good relationships within the system.

MACON PHILLIPS: Yeah, what I'm hearing there too, based on what you were saying earlier too, is

recognize that sometimes people are threatened by new technology and that they may not just be resisting because they don't like you or they're lazy or all the other things that we might want to think. It's also that they're just scared at some level. And the more you can build trust with them and explain to them what's happening and how it's ultimately going to make it easier for them, the more effective you'll be.

It strikes me also that your work is a really good example of digital and social media as what everyone calls that two-way median.

FATU OGWUCHE: Yes.

MACON PHILLIPS: There's a lot of people to look at social media and they say, it's a better way for me to blast out my information. I can put all these pictures and all these videos. And then there's other people that say, social media is about having a conversation and all the cliches that you hear. And they never really operationalize that.

But I think truly with the work you did around the elections, you were both getting information out but also using social media to bring information in. Can you talk a little bit about that relationship?

FATU OGWUCHE: So for the elections, which pretty much involved almost every Nigerian, whether you were eligible to vote or not, because people really had an interest in the electoral process. So for us, it was about creating two-way engagement. So it just wasn't us putting out information. We're also getting information from people as well. So the one thing that social media was able to do was review the needs of Nigerians and voters.

So for example, based on the kind of things that they were asking us, we were able to develop strategies around that and develop the kind of answers they wanted to give them. So we had different activities towards the elections, from voter registration to how do you replace your card if it's lost or damaged. But most of these things, we didn't even know most people wanted to know until they started asking us about them.

So we had this particular voter registration drive, where people had to go to particular places to you register or get their cards. But most of the systems had changed, so people now found out, OK, so if I go to where I registered in 2011, it doesn't necessarily mean that that's where I go to get my voter's card.

So instead of asking us questions about it, we decided instead of getting this person's information and then going into the database to look at exactly where you should go get your card, we decided to partner with an organization called CC Hub, Co-Creation Hub. And they developed this Go Vote for us. So what happens is that you put your voter identification details in a particular box on the app. And then it tells you where you should go get your card. And you also had an SMS system, where you just send it to a particular short code, and it sends a message back to you to tell you where to go get your card.

So things like that were easy. And if we didn't know that these were the things that people were asking for, we could have just been saying, oh, yeah, go get your card. Go get your card. Your cards are ready. Go get your card. But the fact that people were telling us, OK, this is not what it once was. Like you need to guide us.

So we reviewed the needs of people. And we found that even up to the election day, we kept on having to change our strategies and the kind of information we were putting out. Because the information we put out today, for example, tomorrow is like nobody needs it anymore, because they need something new. They needed new information.

MACON PHILLIPS: You were learning things as it happened and changing, as opposed to finishing the election and then doing a review and saying, what should we do next time? And maybe we'll get it right next time. You were able to adjust. Obviously, the story of the Nigeria election is just a bright spot for all of Africa. And we have a season of elections coming up– a season of elections coming up. And you're an old pro now– a new media pro– when it comes to elections. And so let's try to forecast the future here, or at least tell me whether it's here in Ghana or other elections that you're paying attention to, what are some of the sort of issues and topics, not necessarily one candidate over the other, but in terms of the elections and making sure that the process is as healthy as possible. What are you really paying attention to right now?

FATU OGWUCHE: So from what I've found, I'm just talking to fellows in Ghana, in Somalia, in the DRC, countries that have elections towards the end of the year. And most of them just are not really fixated on the candidates. They just really want information that will help them cast their votes the way they should. I make sure that those votes are valid as well, because you know there are ways that you can decide to cast your vote, and it's an invalid vote. So they need information that will help them get better prepared for the electoral process. And they are just now getting it right now.

MACON PHILLIPS: So this is more like voting– how to vote, not necessarily information about who to vote for– voter education.

FATU OGWUCHE: Yeah.

MACON PHILLIPS: And that's certainly something we grapple with a lot in the United States too. There's also voter education, but also turnout and making sure that people are motivated to go to the polls.

FATU OGWUCHE: Yeah, to go out, yeah.

MACON PHILLIPS: So can you talk a little bit about turnout and how you're seeing the role of technology impact that? Do you find that because of social media and because of all this, that you're actually seeing more people paying attention to the process?

FATU OGWUCHE: We had some really unique things that we did with tech giants Twitter and Facebook for our elections this year. We actually found that despite our efforts in trying to get people to come out to vote, because one thing we also realized was with more engagement comes more participation. So people could just be sitting in their houses and they've already made up their minds about voting. But the fact that you see that the electoral commission or people are talking about electoral process, they also want to be part of it somehow.

In 2012, I actually read this research. It was Facebook research. And the title was "How the Democrats got an Upper Hand." And they were referencing the Obama-McCain election. So they were talking about this button which helped like 600,000 extra people, young people, come out to vote because they wanted to use this particular feature. It was called I Voted Button. And basically,

if you were voting in the US as a young person and you logged onto Facebook that day, which chances are, you did, there was a button just right there saying, you are a voter in blah-blah-blah elections. And if you clicked on it, you could just share your experience from your polling unit.

So I read that, and I was like, OK, yeah. So we're not trying to benefit a particular political party, but let me see how we can use this to get more people to come out to vote.

MACON PHILLIPS: Right. When everyone votes, everyone wins.

FATU OGWUCHE: Yeah, exactly. So I know the head of Public Policy Africa on Facebook, Ebele Okobi. I contacted her. And she said, yeah, they were able to something like that for us– the first time in Africa. So they deployed that for us. And we saw, I think, 15,000 extra people used that– came out to vote because they wanted to use that, so– and for Twitter as well. They get this fast feature. So you send a particular message, a particular short code, depending on your carrier. And then if we tweet anything– information, breaking news, whatever– it comes to your phone as a text message free of charge.

It was actually tailored for people at the grassroots, people that didn't have access to internet. So they could be getting the information as we put them out. And then we got about, I think it was 24,000– I'm not sure about the number now. But it was really great. And this are things that were provided to us free of charge, part of the public policy. So I see more things like that happening as we go along in Africa, things like that. And just seeing how other ways that technology could be integrated into helping the electoral process.

MACON PHILLIPS: Tell me something about yourself that would surprise people. You've got someone who's a student, lawyer, then worked in the government, fixed elections around Africa, is on top of getting Facebook to step it up and help out. What's another side of you that might surprise people?

FATU OGWUCHE: Well, I'm a really good dancer. Yeah, I'm a really good dancer. I used to be the best dancer in secondary school. I was the person that will go and watch all the Aaliyah videos and the Beyonce videos. And then I'll come to school and when we had like social nights and people had to dance a particular song, like I was the one that was choreographing for them. I was watching all the B2K videos and doing the choreography.

MACON PHILLIPS: That's awesome.

FATU OGWUCHE: And doing the choreography for them and all of that. And I remember "Candy Shop," 50 Cent. It was like really hot at some point in school, and everybody was trying to do the Olivia bellyroll. And I was the only one that could do it at school. So I was like this hot shot, and everybody had to come to me to learn how to do it. So, yeah.

MACON PHILLIPS: OK. That's a good answer. That qualifies. That answers the question. that's a good answer, yeah.

FATU OGWUCHE: (LAUGHING) OK, great.

MACON PHILLIPS: Yeah, I'll take that. Yeah. (LAUGHING) OK. So Fatu Ogwuche used to choreograph dancers in high school, and now you're choreographing elections around Africa.

FATU OGWUCHE: Yes. Now you see why people ask me what happened when they see me.

MACON PHILLIPS: There's a thread. I can see that. You are doing incredible work in a really important area. I really appreciate your time today and best of luck to you.

FATU OGWUCHE: Thank you.

MACON PHILLIPS: I had a great conversation with Fatu. She's a lot of fun in and obviously has been doing great work with her election efforts. But what really stood out to me is how well she understands the role of social media. She gets that it's a two-way street and that transparency is a cornerstone of any effective strategy.

Many thanks to Fatu for sitting down and sharing her story with us. If you'd like to get in contact with her, you can find her on Facebook, LinkedIn, and SoundCloud all under Fatu Ogwuche. That's F-A-T-U O-G-W-U-C-H-E. Thanks so much for listening and make sure to subscribe so you don't miss any of the upcoming interviews with other young African leaders.

You can join the YALI Network at yali.state.gov and be part of something bigger. Our theme music is "E Go Happen" by Grace Jerry, produced by the Presidential Precinct. The YALI Voices Podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State and is part of the young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U. S. government. Thanks, everyone.

YALI Voices: Self-described 'troublemaker' is a trailblazer [audio]

Amalkher Djibrine Souleymane at the 2015 Mandela Washington Fellowship Presidential Summit (Courtesy photo)

"I've always been, I'm sorry, but a troublemaker," Amalkher Djibrine Souleymane tells the State Department's Todd Haskell in a YALI Voices podcast. In his introduction, Haskell acknowledges that Souleymane is "never one to back down from a fight."

Growing up in Chad, Souleymane was encouraged to pursue an education by her family even at a young age, enrolling at age 6 as the youngest student in her class. But her teacher had other priorities than educating his students. Souleymane's confrontation with him would be only her first challenge against authority.

She also had a big impact as a women studying business and accounting before starting her own construction company. She didn't necessarily like being a trailblazer and refused to let other women take the easy path. "It's like you didn't use the potential in you. You can do more than that," she

said.

Souleymane discusses how her experience as a 2015 Mandela Washington Fellow empowered her while exposing her to the similarities and differences between her country and those of the other Africans she studied with in New Orleans.

She tells young people that you don't need tremendous resources to make changes "because you are everything."

"If you have an NGO, if you have an association of young people, of women, don't always wait for projects to be funded or waiting for money to start doing things," she said. "You can do many things without money."

Listen to the full podcast to learn how her drive to fight and courage to be a pioneer has only grown stronger. For Souleymane, it seems nothing is impossible!

Don't have access to SoundCloud, iTunes or Google Play? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

"YALI Voices Podcast:
Amalkher Djibrine Souleymane"

TODD HASKELL: Welcome, young African leaders. This is the YALI Voices podcast, a place to share some of the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network. My name is Todd Haskell, and I'm so glad you joined us today. Don't forget to subscribe to the podcast and visit yali.state.gov to stay up-to-date on all things YALI.
Today I'm going to have a conversation with Amalkher Djibrine. Amalkher is an inspiring young leader and education advocate from Chad. And we talked about her experience and the Mandela Washington Fellowship, and how it has influenced her life.
She's never one to back down from a fight. And Amalkher has worked tirelessly to promote gender equality for women and advancement through education. Let's jump right into my interview with Amalkher Djibrine.
Well, good morning, Djibrine. It's really a pleasure to be here with you this morning. We're just thrilled that you've been able to come back to the United States.
I can tell you that I began working on the Mandela Washington Fellowship three years ago. And the last three years I would say a large part of my life has been dedicated to working on this program. I remember the early meetings, and what we envisaged about the program. And it's so terrific to see the fellows like you who are already making a difference in your countries and to see the fruits of this program come forward.
I know that you participated in the 2015 Mandela Washington Fellowship. You were here, and you went back to Chad last summer. Can you tell me a little bit about how the program has had an impact on you, and the work that you've been doing in Chad?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: OK, thank you very much. It's really a pleasure being here with you too. I've been of course a Fellow from last year. And I went through a lot of opportunities like networking and having people who are doing the same thing, all that.
So when I went back, I think the program had a lot of impact on me, first of all regarding the networking. Because you have a huge number of people, the same age as you, and doing great things in different countries. And you can charge, you can exchange about what you're doing.

TODD HASKELL: You mean networking with the other Fellows in the other countries.

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: Yeah, networking with the other Fellows. I think it's a unique opportunity that you cannot find any way in other ways. So what I'm doing in Chad exactly is I'm working in youth and woman empowerment organization called Nirvana. And I'm also representing the Women International League for Peace and Freedom, a 100-years-old organization.
And the impact that the program had on me, is like if you want to make a change, you don't have to keep speaking about this change. You have to take an action and maybe people can follow you. Because in the world we have followers and we have people who would take initiative and bring other people on the group. And the thing that I did before I came back here is we have the National Council of Young People of Chad. And this council is the most important thing representing the whole young people of Chad.
But the problem is the leadership is so bad that the last three years, we didn't see anything coming out of this organization. And I tried to approach them and tell them that they have to call all of us in a national assembly, and to tell us what they did the last three years, because nothing is coming out as far as we're concerned. And we had some problems, because they know what they did and they don't want to come out and expose themselves.
Later, I decided to have meeting with young people who are sharing the same idea as I do. And every day we have more people coming to our group, the people who are not OK with the leadership of the National Council. And then we call them, they came, and we asked them. And the answer are not really interesting.
So we said we want you to resign because that's not a good thing, and we need another team because young people are not something easy in Chad, because we are more than 80% of the population. We don't have old people, sorry.

TODD HASKELL: (Laughs) No offense taken.

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: So it's more than 80% of the population. And we have a lot of expectation that we cannot go through in this kind of leadership.
And this problem went to the Ministry of Youth. The Ministry of Youth first of all didn't recognize our committee as complaining a group. And then later on, the program went through to the prime minister and went to the presidency. And they call us in the meeting and they're OK with what we are saying because the other group is not able to answer our questions. And they said I think this group is right, and do you have to go to the Congress because they're asking for the Congress.
And just before I came here, they're preparing for the Congress for people to go through. And I think this is a huge impact of self-determination and self-confidence, because it cannot just go through something so risky if you are not self-confident about what you are doing.

TODD HASKELL: And you used the term there, risky. Can you talk a little bit about the obstacles and the kind of risk that you took, you think, in doing this?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: Yeah, the first risk is the team itself, the former team. The president of the team is a guy that I can call a little bit dangerous because he's moving around with a gun and just intimidating people.

TODD HASKELL: Sounds a little bit dangerous.

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: It's very dangerous, not a little bit. And the problem that he had is the culture is also playing a big role in that. Because if it was a guy doing all that against him, he won't spare him.
But it was a lady though. He's like, I don't know what to do with this lady. Can you please help me move her out of the committee?

TODD HASKELL: Do you think being a woman in this situation allowed you an advantage or allowed you a certain level of protection?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: Yes, of course. I think if I were a guy, it's going to be completely different. And even the guy won't spare me. Won't give me a chance to go that far, because he know what to do with me. But because I'm a woman, the culture is like a man, they don't fight with woman, they don't talk much, that much, with women. And he's like, she is in the middle and I don't know what to do with her.
And people took advantage of that. And the team is growing every day, because they know we are going to the end of the fight. And today I can say it was a fantastic experience, because for the first time in Chad, we had more than 1,000 young people gathered in the same room for their own future. And that was historical. And we had some media and newspapers and all that thing.
And every day people are talking about the same fight. Young people's fight of Chad? It's always the same. Where are you now? And people are calling and sending emails, like, where are you now? I want to join! Where are you now? And I think we went really very fast and very sure of what we are doing, because we are right.
And we did it. It's not yet the end, but I think because the highest authority gave the instruction to the Ministry of Youth to bring us to the National Congress of Youth. I think that's a little bit sexist.

TODD HASKELL: It's a great story. And what's your vision, do you think, for the National Youth Council? What do you want with it when we get to the end? And if you take over?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: First of all, what we want to do is to have a very, very wonderful team. And what I mean by wonderful is a team capable of taking into consideration all the complaining of young people, because we have a lot of problems like unemployment. We have some young people go to drugs and all that. Because of that, our main leader in Chad is the National Youth Council. It's like a political position, but it represent the whole young people of country.
And the voice of this organization is very well heard by the government. But the problem that we had is the leader didn't consider the importance of the organization he's leading. And it's like other association and it's fine, but if we had a good leader who is every day reminding the government and all the stakeholders about the problem of young people, and the solution that we can propose, and what we really want, and as we know these voices are heard, we can have an output of all that and the situation it can change.

TODD HASKELL: Without the experience of the Mandela Washington Fellowship, do you think you would have done all this?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: I will maybe come back before the program. I've always been, I'm sorry, but a troublemaker. Every time I'm the first one who is complaining about something that's going wrong within the community, within the young people, and all that. So I think the program helped me a lot by giving me self-confidence and giving me an idea about the power

and the energy of the team.
And also an idea about one doesn't have to sit behind and talk about, yeah, we need change. We are poor. We don't have this, we don't have that. Instead of going through the problem inside, and try to make this smallest action that you can, and other people can just follow what you are doing. So I think the program help a lot by giving this self-confidence and motivation to make positive impacts every time by the smallest action that you can bring.

TODD HASKELL: That's good. But you say you were always a troublemaker. I know you grew up near Lake Chad, and later on you moved into the capital. Can you tell me a little bit about that and some of the trouble you made when you were a young person?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: First of all, the first year of my school I had some elder sisters at home. And at that time, it's not even easy to bring daughters, girls to French schools. Because most of the parents bring their daughters to Arabic schools. And that's a culture anyways.

TODD HASKELL: To Arabic schools, not French schools.

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: Because we have two official languages. It depends also on the religion, but that's how they do. But our mother, she's like, I'm going to bring my daughters to French school because she saw the difference between the outcome of the two languages later on. On the career and all that thing.
So she brought my elder sister there. And every day they're going to school. I'm following them. And they're bringing me back at home because you are too young to go to school every day.
And later she said, I can't just go out every day and bring her back at home. I have to just let her go to school. And then she registered me to the school.

TODD HASKELL: How old were you at that time?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: I was too young, like 6 years old. But in Chad, they bring people at school at 7, 8, something like that. So I went to school the first year. And the surprise was I met some young girls that went to school last year telling me that I am very lucky to be in the first grade. I'm like, why?
They said the teacher is always sleeping, so you have time to do whatever you want. And I was like, what do you mean? You go and see by yourself. So when I went to the class the first day, everyone is in the class. The teacher, he closed the door and then he's left.
Like, OK. And that's really bold.

TODD HASKELL: That's terrible.

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: And then everybody is playing like, whoa. I'm like OK, that's the first day. Let's see tomorrow. And then he did it for four days. And this fifth day I stayed at home.
And my father was like, why are you staying at home? You are the one who is always running to go to school. I'm like, there's no school. And when he asked me, I said the teacher is always sleeping. And he said, you're kidding me? I said that's the truth.
So he went back to school and he check by himself. He went to the supervisors and we did a big problem out of it. And the teacher was so angry on me that he was beating me every day because of what I did. So every day they ask him to leave the door open, and a supervisor are coming over all

the time. So that's the beginning.

TODD HASKELL: That's the first time you caused trouble.

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: Yeah. That's first time, to cause trouble. And then later on in the secondary school, we have some clubs and some union of students. And I found out that in this union, we don't have girls involved in. And I'm like, why don't you involve girls? And I had some awareness to do to the girls. Because girls are refusing to be part of the club. That's why. So I had to work hard for them to be within the club. Because the club is the only one structure able to complain the voices of all students. So it means that if we are not inside, our voices are not heard.
So we have to be in it. And later, I had some problem with the guys. Do you know how old are you? The guys, they're talking about my age. Because my age is — it's completely different than they are. And the ladies that I am pushing are also so older. And the guys are like, what are you doing? Do you know how old are you? I'm like, I know how old I am. That's why I'm not involving myself, but I'm pushing other people to get involved on it.

TODD HASKELL: Through all of this, you're making a big splash and you're doing things that I think young girls don't normally do in where you're from. What did your parents think? Were they supportive? It sounds like your dad, your father was very supportive when you were complaining about the fact that there was — well, the teacher was just sleeping. Did your parents remain supportive of you?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: Yeah, they did. I think the reason why I keep doing all that is because they believe that what I'm doing is right. Because I'm always sharing what I'm doing at school and everywhere with them. There's no secrets.
When I found out that something is wrong, I'm also talking to them and then having their point of view about the problem before acting some of the times. But some of the time the acting come first, and then I will tell them about the problem. But we're always supportive to what I'm doing. And that's why I kept doing the same thing.

TODD HASKELL: That's great. And as a girl doing this, as a woman doing this, being so active and doing that, did people ever say that wasn't the right role for a woman? Not the right role for a girl? Did they suggest that you shouldn't be doing those kind of things? Not your parents, but your peers and your teachers and other people like that?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: Not really teachers bad. The students in general, they think I am different.

TODD HASKELL: I think you are.

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: And I can also come back to my childhood, and that's the difference that they told me. Because when I was very young, I don't know what I did, but the parents are always like, when people are running to play with dolls and all that thing, I'm not doing the same thing. And they don't know why.

TODD HASKELL: What were you doing?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: I could be maybe reading some cartoons, like cartoon books,

and all that. Because the English that I am speaking today, I started learning from a very low age. When I started speaking English, there's not all English in this city. But because I had the chance to go to the library and taking books every day, I was just negotiating with the library guy. When you go back to the capital city, can you please bring me some different books and all that?
And he started bringing some books with different language. And he said this is English. I'm like, OK. I will try English. Because there is no other baby books. I finished the cartoons.
The whole library I finished. The guy's like, why are you coming every day? I'm like, but I finished this one! I don't know what to do with this one. I already finish it. I need another one.
So I started learning English without even knowing the importance of this language. I didn't know English is spoken almost everywhere in the world. So my peers, they think I'm speaking an old language. They say, oh, she want to start speaking something that you don't understand.
But they don't even know English. We are very young to understand all that. So this difference is maybe in many sense, my childhood.

TODD HASKELL: So this spirit was born within you well before you ever came on the Mandela Washington Fellowship. You had this urge to learn, you read all the books in the library, you moved on. And what was it like when you went on to N'Djamena and you began to become a teenager and a little bit older. I know you started a business.

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: Yeah. When we came to N'Djamena and I went to high school, I've also got involved in the school students' association. As we are doing business school, in the class, in the MBA classes we don't see girls. And at the beginning, I really wanted to go to architecture, but there is no school for architecture in Chad. And they said if you want to go to architecture, let's prepare some papers for you and get a visa for you for France and all that thing.
And when they counted the times, I would be losing one year. I'm like, I'm not going to lose this one year. Maybe I will think about that later. But I went for accounting and business administration.

TODD HASKELL: In Chad?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: Yeah, in Chad. But the problem is the people that we have in the class, most of them are men. And they have or already started doing some business. But we don't have girls.
The teacher is like, are you sure, did you start any business. I'm like, not yet. I don't have any business yet. Are you sure you want to go to the business schools? Yes, I'm going to go to business schools.
And I asked question, why we don't have ladies in there? And when I was talking with some ladies, they want to go and have a degree, work in an office, get some salary, and that's it. So almost all of them are like, I don't know, but if I got a wonderful job, I think I would be successful. But the problem is I can't call it success because it's normal. Everybody who has a degree, one of the day get a job and have some salary.
And it's like you didn't use the potential in you. You can do more than that. And I was working in a business, not my own, but in a network marketing business, where two years after I found myself taking care of 400 official distributors in my own computer. When the new distributor came to the office, they were like, we are looking for Amalkher. And that's me!
Not you. I'm looking for Amalkher. You're going to come back to me. And when they come back, they're like, are you sure you are the manager of — it's called Edmark, Edmark International. Are

you sure you are the manager of Edmark International?
I'm like, yeah, I am. It's not easy, but you know, it's just internet. That's the problem when in the country people are not more involved in the new technology for information and communication. It seems really strange.

TODD HASKELL: People didn't believe that you were the head because you were a woman. And they expected to see a man having all this responsibility. Is that right?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: Even if it's not a man, they expect to see an older woman, not a child. I'm sorry. Not like — somebody like that. That's not to you. I'm looking for somebody else.
But the problem is the gender problem exist. That's the reality in Chad. That people don't believe in the potential of woman. That's a real problem that we are fighting with the Women International for Peace and Freedom. And because you can feel it everywhere.
Because later on in 2012, have created my own building company that people like you are now crazy. Now you confirm that you're crazy. The problem is when I was looking for the license, the registration of my company, all throughout the process, people are calling me from the beginning, in the middle, at the end. Amalkher — because some of them know me — are you sure you are going to create a building company? I'm like, OK, yeah.
Did you see Amalkher in the paper? Yes. So just keep moving it. So when I had the company out, the problem was the gender, and that's clear. Because I targeted the government situations because we have some maintenance problem.
It's not a matter of just having a building. But you have to take care of the building to be a beautiful one. Because if you would just build it and leave it, that's not good at all. So my company is focusing on building and the maintenance of this buildings. And when there is a contract going out in a newspaper, and then I went for the contact, most of the time I'm out.
And when I decided not to just go for the competitions, but go by myself presenting my company to the people and leaving them the overview of the company in case they can maybe call me for anything that they want. But the problem is, they don't believe that you can do that. Yeah. No, I can't give you my building's contract because I don't think you can do it the right way. Or I don't think you can build it the way I really want it. So it's like they don't believe in it really. And it's very hard.

TODD HASKELL: Have you been able to overcome that with the businesses? Is the business successful?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: Yeah, I can say it's successful today because I've changed my strategy. Because going to the people that don't believe in the work that you will do is not a solution. I can maybe come back later by proving them the contrary or the opposite. But now I am targeting the international NGOs, the people coming from outside that believe the work that a woman can do is the same that the work that a man can do.

TODD HASKELL: It's often better.

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: So I'm targeting this people like the embassies, and the NGOs, and the United Nations organizations. I have some small contacts for the beginning. And I think that's the success. Because if you already start having some contracts and doing a wonderful work, there will just notice the work that you're doing. And they will just come back to you by asking

your service, because the service is perfect.

TODD HASKELL: So how did you first hear about the Mandela Washington Fellowship? Was it on the internet? Did friends tell you about it? When did you first hear about it for the first time?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: The first time I heard about is because I am in the newsletter of something called Opportunity Desk. That every time they give the available opportunities that there are. And I came to the one, Mandela Washington. And when I went through it, I found out that it's a very interesting program. And I didn't hesitate a minute.
I directly applied for it. And it was a surprise because they select people from 25 to 35. But at the time I was 24. And they said they will consider some successful people under 25. But I applied, but when the result come, I was like, that's wonderful. And I didn't expect to have such a good experience here.

TODD HASKELL: Well tell me about that. So you applied, you did your interview, you got selected. Obviously, you must have been very excited about that.
You took your first trip to the United States. And I think you went to New Orleans, right? You were in Tulane University to attend the six-week class. What were your first impressions when you arrived in the United States?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: I've been at United States before, like two times. But this time was different because I've been there for vacancies and something else, a conference of one week.

TODD HASKELL: For a vacation, or for — right.

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: But this time is a long time, and it was different. When I came here I've been in New Orleans, that I can call a unique city because of the diversity and people are very friendly there.
And I also want to point out the fact that we came here on the Ramadan day, Ramadan time. But it is so strange. We didn't feel anything bad. Like everybody is taking care of us. You are fasting? OK. We can keep some food for you. People are so good. Every time I come back home, I'm like, these people are really wonderful people. Because they don't really care about any differences. They're all the same.
And if you have something, they're ready to take care of you. And the program was also wonderful because we had different experience. We went out for some institution to see how they work. And we had some cultural night. And I think in New Orleans, we experienced many things like food, different cultures. New Orleans it's like a city that's always welcoming.

TODD HASKELL: So you're there. You're in Tulane, and there's 24 other Fellows from across the continent. What was that experience like meeting Africans from across the continent, and spending so much time with them?
Were you surprised by how much you had in common? Or were you surprised by how different you felt? Or what was your experience there?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: It was, I can call it again, a unique experience. Because when we are in a team, we sometimes have to forget about our differences and come together for one goal. Some of the Americans are calling Africa a country. I wish it is a country because

sometimes you have to feel unique. You have to feel like the same people from the same place, and addressing same problems.
And that's what I felt when I was in the team. Because every evening we are sitting together talking serious problems. Because most of the time we have groups, and when they have free time it's just to dance or having a good time. But we're like no. We are not doing it every day. Some of the day we have to sit and talk about our different problems all over our countries and see what you can propose from me, what I can propose for you. And it was a very constructive. We kept doing it because we have created a Whatsapp group of the 25 people that went to Tulane.

TODD HASKELL: So you remain in touch with them?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: Yeah, we remain in touch and we've been talking about serious problem about our work, what we do in our country, and giving contributions, ideas.

TODD HASKELL: Were there any fellows in particular you became very close friends with? Or that you learned a lot about their country?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: Yeah, of course. And that's natural because when you are in a group, you become close to some people and not everyone. Of course I had a close friend from Kenya. And that talked much to me, because I've never been in Kenya. And today I know a lot about Kenya thanks to him.
And he was also asking about Chad. So it's like we are sharing different experiences. And at the end of the day, you've never been in Chad, but you know a lot about Chad because there's somebody telling you the reality. Somebody who is within the problems, within the every days aspect of Chad, telling you the reality of the country. So it was a wonderful experience.

TODD HASKELL: Would you recommend it to other Chadians? That they apply for the Fellowship? Do you recommend it on a regular basis now when you're back?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: Yeah. When I went back, the #YALILearns courses that we have, I've been using them throughout the year. Every time we are calling young people to come to the #YALILearns and that's the opportunity to talk to them about the YALI itself. Because most of them have heard about it. And when you say, it's English. Most of them are going back because we have wonderful guys. We have wonderful young people doing magic things in the country. But the only one problem that they have is the Fellowship, it's all an English. Like even the interview in the embassies are in English.
So that's the only one problem we have. But myself, I'm recommending this program to every young person in the country. And as a matter of fact, we had this big estimating that I was talking about earlier. And I didn't forget to remind them about YALI, because it's nothing to do with YALI, right? But I reminded of them because I'm like, oh, this is the chance. I'm not going to be able to bring all of them again, so let's talk about YALI and tell them that it's going to be in November or something like that. And let them apply more and more. And the result is the first year we had three Chadians here in 2014. We had four in 2015. Now we have 10. We can say it's because they became 1,000. But I don't think so. I think the reason is we mobilized a lot of young people to apply for it.

TODD HASKELL: That's a terrific story. And let me say also at the end of the six weeks, first you go through the six weeks of training. You have these terrific opportunities to meet people from across

Africa, obviously people across New Orleans. There's this academic training. But then you get the chance to come to Washington and attend the summit. What was the highlight of the summit for you?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: This summit was magic. First of all, because it's not only 25 of us, it's 500. And you see a young person every time going this way or the other and from the same group. And what is fantastic is you can imagine the potential of every one of the Fellows because I can think it's explosive potential that all of us have. And I believe that every young person has potential. The reason why we have many problems all across the globe is because some of them don't know how to use it positively. Then they go for the negative way. And that's why we have a lot of problems today.

So we can maybe help them go to the positive way by doing something like this program. I think this program is phenomenal. So in the summit, besides meeting all of them and having the name and faces book, that is like a treasure, we hold also the opportunity to meet the President of the United States in person.

TODD HASKELL: What was that like?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: It was really fantastic. I can say because I've never met my own president, I didn't expect to meet him. But through this program I had the chance to meet him. And most importantly, the message that he has to the African youth.

TODD HASKELL: What is that message?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: That's the most important part. And we were talking about — the president was telling us about the good governance. To build a society, we have some secrets. And the secrets are, you have to start from the baby. You can't just leave a child having whatever education, and then you come after he's 18 years old.

And it's like, why did you do that? Don't do it this way. No, he's not going to hear you, right? Because you didn't take care of him since his childhood.

So if we want to address and bring solution to our problems, we have to go to the basic level of education, of health. Because it's a matter of awareness. It's not like every problem should be addressed only by money. But we can address the biggest problem in the world just because we know how to address them. But awareness, telling people the right way, bringing them from this bad path to another good one.

So I think his message about the good governance, the human rights, because that's the main problem we have there, the corruption. You can talk about corruption in public in Chad, because it's normal. If you want to address all that, it's true all of us here today. The Fellows and going back to the children going to school now. We have to help them since that level.

So when they grow up, they will grow up with a different point of view, grow up with a different picture of what they want to do, and the things will change automatically. We don't have to be behind. Everything will change by itself. So I think that's the message that I got from him. And I will try my best to make it work in my community.

TODD HASKELL: What really comes through to me listening to you speak is that all your life people were telling you things that you can't do, and you insisted on doing them anyway and you made it work. You've been a tremendous change maker even before you ever came on the Fellowship. And I

congratulate you for that.

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: Thank you.

TODD HASKELL: But going back to Chad after this tremendous experience in the United States where you got to do the academic training, got to go to the summit, meet people from all over Africa, and meet President Obama, you go back to Chad. Did that take it to the next level for you? Did you feel even more empowered?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: Yes, very, very empowered. And very empowered because someone has seen what I've been doing. Something like that. And it is encouraging me to do even more. It's not a matter of what I'm doing. I am every day. But it's much of the impact that what you're doing is making in your community and in the people living in it. That's why I am reminding young people every time that if you have an NGO, if you have an association of young people, of women, don't always wait for projects to be funded or waiting for money to start doing things. Because you are everything. You are everything.
You can do many things without money. You can decide making difference and letting people notice the difference that you are doing without $1. So that's the secret that many people don't know. Because we have many associations in Chad. And because of the program, as you were saying, when I went back I was trying to bring feedbacks from many of the association of young people and women about a problem, like why you're not going through? What is happening? Why you're not developing yourself or developing the NGO? And this answer that I'm having from them is the same. We have this project, and it didn't get funded. And I have also this project and that project and no money. So we decided, because we have created another organization called
Collectif Des Associations Pour La Citoyenneté Et La Sauvegarde Des Acquis Démocratiques Au Tchad.

TODD HASKELL: For Citizenship and the Safeguarding of Democracy.

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: And Democratic Achievements, something like that. But through this organization, we are organizing special training to the NGOs and association leaders to let them know how they can get started even with zero. And making impacts. You don't have to underestimate your impact. The smallest impact you can do. So we are training them like association management. How to work without anything.
Because there is some of the thing that you can do like the training that we are doing. We didn't get any money. But the training is the key of everything.

TODD HASKELL: That's great.

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: Even in your own organization, you can start doing training to people. And you happening. That's the action that we're looking for. And today, just like we are, the office, mine is so crowded because every day we have many people inside. Can you tell me how they do this? How to do that? But the staff, we have a lot of people working with us. So we are playing the role of like councils, people giving advices.
Finally, we found ourselves doing that. But that's not the first goal of our own organization. So the goal is moving from here to that because people are asking for our help.

TODD HASKELL: You're shining a light, and I think people are coming towards it, because you're

such a tremendous example. It strikes me, you've accomplished more in your life than many people do over their whole life, and yet you're — if I can say it — you're still young. Where do you see yourself in 20 or 25 years more? What would you like to achieve, ultimately? And I mean both for yourself, but also for Chad.

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: I believe if you need to make a bigger change, you have to be able to affect the biggest part of the country and of the population. So where I see myself in — as you said, it's a long time, right? 20 years? 25?

TODD HASKELL: It goes like that (snaps fingers), believe me.

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: It goes like that because I can also think about being the first president of Chad, a woman. Because for me, it's not a surprise. It's not something impossible. It's possible for everyone to think that way.
But the reason behind that could be different. You could think about that for you to have the biggest power to affect positively, and so things will grow quickly in your country. We need true people doing true things and right thing, fair things for the whole planet.

TODD HASKELL: And I think the lesson of your life too, is that you can't let people tell you no, it's too hard, it can't be done, because you've accomplished so many things.

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: I hope so.

TODD HASKELL: We're going to probably close. But I do want to give you a chance, if there is any other message you want to deliver. This has been a fascinating conversation.
And I always feel so much better about the future of Africa when I talk to its young people. And I particularly feel that after this conversation. But what else would you like to tell the folks who are listening to us now?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: What I want to tell the folks who are listening to us is to think about only one community, only one people, all over the world. We can also think about particularly the continent of Africa. And talking about this special program of YALI, let's think of being only one family, same people with same problem, and addressing all this problem together.
Let's come together to address this same problem. And let's stop putting barriers between all of us. And that's why working on the RAB, the regional advisory board — I'm also every day reminding people of the RAB is divided into three regions.

TODD HASKELL: Just for our listeners, the regional advisory boards are YALI Fellows from around West Africa, in your case, who were elected by the other Fellows. And there's 10 of you. And you work together in organizing YALI activities regionally.

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: Yeah, that's it. So it doesn't mean that the YALI group, it's divided. Let's think it's only one Africa. That's the message that I want to give to people.

TODD HASKELL: Great. Djibrine, this has been such a fascinating conversation. I know there's a lot of people out there who will want to reach out and have a conversation with you on social media or however, what's the best way that they can reach out and talk to you?

AMALKHER DJIBRINE SOULEYMANE: The best way they can reach me is through Facebook with

my name,

Amalkher Djibrine Souleymane. And also through Skype with Amalkher88.

TODD HASKELL: Great, thank you. Thanks so much for listening, and make sure to subscribe so you don't miss out on any of our fascinating interviews with other young African leaders from across the continent. Join the YALI Network at yali.state.gov and be part of something bigger.
Our theme music is "E Go Happen" by Grace Jerry, and produced by the Presidential Precinct. The YALI Voices podcast is brought to you by the United States Department of State, and as part of the Young African Leaders Initiative funded by the U.S. government. Thanks everyone.

YALI Voices: Co-founder of Nigerian Youths in Motion propels education reform [audio]

(YouTube – Presidential Precinct)

"I need to be the kind of person that creates opportunities," Oluwatimilehir "Timi" Olagunju from Nigeria tells the State Department's Macon Phillips in a podcast.

Through his non-profit organization Nigerian Youths in Motion (NYM), Timi helps empower over 350 young Nigerians in engaging their community, government and institutions to help create better opportunities for themselves and their peers.

NYM "was born out of a need to harness the intellectual energies and creativity of young people. So it was channeling it towards making policy recommendations to the government," he said.

So far the organization has been able to increase Nigeria's education budget by 350 percent since 2012.

What's next for this hardworking lawyer, writer and speaker? Listen to the full podcast to find out!

Don't have access to Sound Cloud? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

Yes we can. Sure we can. Change the world.

MACON PHILLIPS: Welcome young African leaders. This is the YALI Voices podcast. A place to share some of the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative network. My name is Macon Phillips. Thank you for joining us today. Don't forget to subscribe to this podcast by visiting yali.state.gov to stay up-to-date on everything YALI. And if you like what you hear, we'd love it if you'd recommend us to your friends.

I recently had the chance to sit down with Timi Olagunju. Timi is a really interesting guy from Nigeria. He's a lawyer. He's an author. He's a speaker. And he's really passionate about good governance. Someday, he might even be president of Nigeria.

At age 10, Timi's father left, his mother lost her job, and he was forced to finish his primary education in a barely functioning public school. From that point on, Timi has dedicated his life to fighting for good governance, human rights, democracy, and you. He credits his work ethic and values, not surprisingly, to his mom. And that's where we'll pick up the interview.

Let's start. Tell me about your mom, Timi.

TIMI OLAGUNJU: OK. My mum was a fantastic woman. I grew up with my mum and she gave me the opportunity to become the man that I am and will be through dedication towards investment in education, and an emphasis on values, and the need to serve the people, service, basically. So those core values were quite fundamental and I learned them through my mum.

MACON PHILLIPS: Look, we've all been kids.

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Yeah.

MACON PHILLIPS: Sometimes having your parents say you need to get out there and do public service isn't exactly what you want to hear. You know what I mean? So how was your mom able to get you in the right direction? What was her style like? Was she kind of stern and drawing the lines or was she real friendly?

TIMI OLAGUNJU: She was real friendly.

MACON PHILLIPS: OK.

TIMI OLAGUNJU: She was not particularly empathetic as to– what's it called– how it should go. But there's this thing about I learned from her which is the fact that when you create the right environment for child, you see the child explore the context of that environment to develop personal creativity, develop personal values. And that's something she does.

She insures that I get busy with the right things. She enrolls me in the right association. Gets me involved with her. I come back from school she says, where's your homework? So basically, it's about the environment.

Even my influence towards studying law was not– she said, what did you want to study? And I looked. I said engineering. I'm good at math. OK Accounting. I'm good at economics. And law? Hmm, well it's good, Timi. So it was more like that.

MACON PHILLIPS: So did you come out of that house on a straight line knowing exactly what you wanted to do and no interference.

[LAUGHING]

No problems. You know, just a cake walk all the way through?

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Not at all. Not at all.

MACON PHILLIPS: What happened? Where did it all go wrong?

TIMI OLAGUNJU: OK. Well, basically, the truth about it is they say he has to go around [INAUDIBLE] sometimes. Sometimes you take the non out of the nonsense. You find sense. So the nonsense, where the non came into the sense, was from really during my teenage years when I didn't particularly know what I wanted to do.

I was so good at [INAUDIBLE] and mathematics. I perhaps was so good that I thought engineering was my way and, at that time, my math teacher loved me. So I felt that, well, this is it. And then, consequently, I lead to decide, OK, no, accounting. I think I should be an accountant. And then later on, law.

But during that time, before then, there was a time that– because I started my primary school, it was one of the best schools in Nigeria– I was taught by Kenyans. To be frank, Kenyans actually have some of the best teachers too. So we had Kenyan teaches. I had Irish teachers. I had teachers from the UK teaching.

But at the time, my dad traveled and then I didn't have the opportunity to see him anymore. And then my mom had to take up the responsibility of catering for a young man who was– and then, at that time, several things happened and then everything collapsed.

So I had to move from a private school that was high class, high brow, with the high things. I came to a really public school, secondary high school. That's a secondary school. And, in that secondary school, you have to find chairs. Sometimes we had to struggle to get chairs. So the big guys like you, you, and the small guys like us, would have to tussle chairs out.

And then you find that teachers never came to class. So they were more particular about coming to class when the investigators were around. So that gave me an understanding, the look. I was coming from this world. Now I'm in this particular world.

The difference here is the fact that it is not as if the people in this other world do not have capacities, but they don't have opportunities. So that stuck in my mind. I need to be the kind of person that creates opportunities. And then that drove, in my mind, I need to be that kind of person.

Because the kind of person that can drive policies, that provide equal opportunities for the young and security for the old. Because when you create security for the old, the young they are more interested, excited about working hard in the future. So that actually drove my line towards law, governments, policy.

MACON PHILLIPS: Right. So walk us through that. So you're in secondary school. You get, kind of, a splash of water in the face. Like, this is the way the world works and–

TIMI OLAGUNJU: You need to be calm.

MACON PHILLIPS: Realizing– yeah, we have to stay calm. That's right. We've all had those moments. And so you decide then that you really want to pursue a career that creates opportunities for other people. So just walk us quickly through where you went from there and how you found yourself in a law school classroom.

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Exactly. So consequently, in my secondary school, it was the senior years, somehow I stumbled into a Press Club. And in the Press Club we would write articles. Articles about teachers were strategic and systematic. How can you fight the same people that you– on that same roof and we'd write the articles and paste them in the schools. So it was trouble.

So from there I moved into becoming the acting editor in chief for the Press Club. And there I really came to start concretizing my ideals in terms of the capacity to actually vocalize, accentuate your ideas in such a way that it influences people. So I started through words. And then from there, law.

So I studied law at the university . And so, at the university, I already had an idea of the fact that, look, I was more tilted towards leadership and governance. And so, at the university, I just decided to look. After the first year. After having a good foundation. A good grade. Because even the ladies know that, if the foundation be destroyed, what can [INAUDIBLE] do? You know. And that's the truth.

So I wanted to create a good foundation because I understand the importance of foundation in primary school. That helped me even when I was not in the same level at the primary school. And then at 200 level, I started getting into leadership. I was very involved in leadership until I literally became the chairman of the largest undergraduate hostel in the university.

And, at then, there was no student union. So ultimately because of that rule, I became the interim student union president for a whole year. And then that really gave me another platform to [INAUDIBLE] beyond just writing and words because I came to [INAUDIBLE] through words.

People like the way I talk and when I write. So they, hey, who's this Timi guy? And then leadership opportunity came and then I started developing my capacity to lead. And after going through law school and all that, I focused more around law, governance, and leadership and everything that I do, at this moment, around that. Everything.

MACON PHILLIPS: So now how long ago was that? When did you finish law school?

TIMI OLAGUNJU: 2009.

MACON PHILLIPS: So 2009. So what have the last seven years been for you in terms of focusing on governance? I'm sure you've kept learning. I'm sure you kept succeeding and failing and then trying to chart a course through all this. So take us through the last seven years. What have you been working on?

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Yes. Well, fantastic. When people hear seven years, they look at my face and they say, OK, he's not that old.

[LAUGHING]

Well, I just became 30 years a few weeks ago.

MACON PHILLIPS: That's not that old. Don't worry. Don't worry. You don't have any gray hairs yet. So don't worry about that.

TIMI OLAGUNJU: So basically I had to clarify that. The truth about it is through that time I first

went through tutelage. I worked with some seniors and all that, in the law practice, and so that I can get an understanding of what it was like. And then, two years doing that, I knew that I just had to do something different.

So we started up the Nigerian Youths in Motion. The Nigerian Youths in Motion was born out of a need to harness the intellectual energies and creativity of young people. So it was channelling it towards making policy recommendations to the government. And so we started that up. I became a co-founder and throughout that we've, through the Nigerian Youths in Motion, we've made a lot of successes, in education for instance.

In 2012 budgets, we were able to increase the budget for education from around $110 million naira to over 350% and it's not being done in the last 15 years.

MACON PHILLIPS: Well, that will buy some more chairs, right?

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Yes.

MACON PHILLIPS: You know what I mean?

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Exactly.

MACON PHILLIPS: That's great.

TIMI OLAGUNJU: And we did that–

MACON PHILLIPS: How did you do that?

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Exactly.

MACON PHILLIPS: One of the things I hear from people when I talk to them, and this is in the states, but certainly when I talk to people in YALI, it's easy to describe the problem, but the government and changes in policy can seem so far away. How did you even start? Where's the first step?

TIMI OLAGUNJU: That's the key point. That is a fundamentally key point. And that's what we need to learn because evidence is the end of argument. Most times you don't look around us enough to see those who are doing something around what we seem to want to solve and then learn from there.

The strategy's just simple. We went. We declared a policy statement stating the facts. And that's why you need to get your facts right with the right team of people. You need a body. All the civil rights movements in the US, all the movements in the world that succeed, do not will succeed on the shoulders of individuals. There's not like [INAUDIBLE].

You need to create a structure. And so we came up with a structure, the Nigerian Youths in Motion. The structure started gaining momentum. That's people that buy into the same ideals. That's people. The people start to recommend policy. Policy connected with people recommend policy.

But we didn't stop at that. We had to be strategic. So being a lawyer, I used my legal skills in courts. Most all the issues were won out of the courts, mobilizing young people. So for that particular issue,

we had what we call, push. Protest until something happens. And we're focused and our focus was education.

Where is cut everywhere? Where in education, in finance, in procurement? No Tom, Dick, and Harry. We're just Tom. I let Dick and Harry alone. So education. We focused on that. We zoomed down. Put all our strategies to it. Interestingly, with media, press publicity, and at all. And that's the same strategy.

MACON PHILLIPS: Same focus.

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Yes. So that's one thing young people need to understand. It's not an individual thing. It's not about competition. It's about complementation.

MACON PHILLIPS: Now, in terms of the specific focus, education was the topic, but your example success was pretty specific. You were able to say this budget was increased by x percentage so–

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Yes.

MACON PHILLIPS: In terms of your message, what you were saying to the government, what you were saying to the media, what you were saying to other people that wanted to join the group, were you moving beyond simply, education's important, we need to do something about it, to a more specific ask.

TIMI OLAGUNJU: The strategy to get people inclined with the ideal was simple. Not everybody was focused on education. That's the truth. Some people were more focused on cost of health. Some people were more focused about graduating and getting a job. Employment.

But, somehow, the think tank were able to come up with a strategy that outlines all the different needs around the central theme of education. And so, if your issue is health, we'll make you realize the connection between health and education. So our campaign was around that. And the social media was very powerful. But outside the social media were also these hand deals.

MACON PHILLIPS: Combine the online and the offline.

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Yes. To galvanize people.

MACON PHILLIPS: That's an amazing victory and I assume that organization's continuing?

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Yes. That's one of the many.

MACON PHILLIPS: Youths are still in motion?

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Yes. Yes. Still in motion. In fact, we've even moved beyond Youths in Motion. We've moved to the Good Governance Hub which started last year after the elections.

MACON PHILLIPS: In Nigeria?

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Yes. Now the Good Governance Hub came up on off-shoot of Nigerian Youths in Motion. But then Good Governance Hub came up after the election. We did a survey in the Nigerian Youths in Motion. We looked at whether the electoral capacity, being the fact that young people

voted massively, translated to power for young people. Nigeria is a country, 18 to 35, 65% of the population. Young people. Massively young people.

Now the truth about it is this. That should be reflected in political participation. And, if it is not, then there's a problem. The democracy, with inclusiveness. And so we did a research. Federal parliamentarians, how many federal parliamentarians are between the ages of 30 and 35? Shocker. Just one. And that one parliamentarian, this year, he's 36. Already he's crossed over. Simply we don't have a youth now.

We now went forward. We said, look, let's be a little bit generous. OK? Let's go 36 to 40. Can we get someone within that age? We got only nine people. And then we looked at lead women. OK, women between the ages of 30 and 40, because 30 is the age you can vote. And that's one of things we are fighting. That, if you can pay your taxes at 18, and you can join the army and die for your country at 18, it is logical, sensible, and correct that you can also be voted for at 18. So that's a push.

But then, 30 to 40 for females, we didn't find any. So that spotted something. Now, look, we need to increase political participation. So Good Governance Hub.

MACON PHILLIPS: Right. And so that's–

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Was [INAUDIBLE] last year. We've had three events with successes also. With a different strategy from the Nigerian Youths in Motion. You know, Nigerian Youths in Motion is more on focusing. But the Good Governance Hub is now becoming a Hub. And, in the next 10 years, in the next 15 years, our goal is to make the Good Governance Hub become an innovation center that will not just only increase youth participation directly, but to engage young people to solve community problems around governance and democracy.

MACON PHILLIPS: And are you looking really just within Nigeria? Or are you looking regionally?

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Nigeria. For the next 10 years. And then the success in Nigeria will be a pilot for a sort of franchise for other success stories to spring forward from there.

MACON PHILLIPS: Well, I'm sure as you know, throughout YALI and even beyond YALI, there's a ton of Timi's in other countries that are focused on good governance and some sort of [INAUDIBLE] network model. So my guess is that you're going to be, if you already aren't already, lashed up with other people sharing those best practices. And you strike me as someone who may never sleep. I don't know.

[LAUGHING]

A lot of energy. So would you say you're someone who is an early morning riser or are you a late night owl?

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Well, I do a lot of the stuff in the night and also in the morning.

MACON PHILLIPS: Exactly. So you never sleep.

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Well, in the afternoon, I take some great key nap. Because I know I'm most active in the morning and in the night. So I do a lot of thinking in the morning because you can't give what

you don’t have. In my book, The Hustler’s Mentality, I wrote about the peak time, the peak place. Your peak time defers. For me, my peak time is morning and also night, so I try to maximize that. Then in the afternoon, I could have fun and just relax.

MACON PHILLIPS: OK. All right. I like that. That’s good. Well, we are hearing from the future president of Nigeria here. You heard it here first.

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Yes. Yes.

MACON PHILLIPS: We got the early interview.

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Yes.

[LAUGHING]

MACON PHILLIPS: We’ll have the follow-up interview in your office, in a few years.

TIMI OLAGUNJU: Yes.

MACON PHILLIPS: And it’s just been a real treat talking to you. I really appreciate it. Thanks for all of your time today. Thank you for being here.

TIMI OLAGUNJU: It’s a pleasure.

MACON PHILLIPS: Well it’s pretty clear that Timi is an energetic, natural leader who’s really making things happen in Nigeria and I want to thank him for spending his time with all of us today. If you’d like to get in touch with him, check him out on Twitter at Timi the law. That’s T-I-M-I-T-H-E-L-A-W, and on Facebook as Timmy Olagunju.

His books, The Hustlers Mentality, Leading From Within, and Yes, Africa Can, are both available online. Don’t forget to check out his organizations as well, Nigerian Youths in Motion and the Good Governance Hub.

Thanks so much for listening and make sure to subscribe so you don’t miss any of the upcoming interviews with other young African leaders. Join the YALI network at yali.state.gov and be part of something bigger. Our theme music is E Go Happen by Grace Jerry, produced by the Presidential Precinct. The YALI voices podcast is brought to you by the US Department of State and is part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the US government.

YALI Voices : After being compared to Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, what’s your next career move? [audio]

(Courtesy of Raindolf Owusu)

In 2012, a 22-year-old Ghanaian computer science student named Raindolf Owusu introduced African internet users to the Anansi Browser. It is considered Africa's first web browser and was designed to help users with unreliable internet connections stay connected as well as use games and a web camera that can operate offline.

For his creation, he has been dubbed "the Mark Zuckerberg of Accra" by Forbes Africa magazine. But as he tells the State Department's Macon Phillips in a YALI Voices podcast, as successful and as celebrated as the browser has been been, he lives in a country where many people can't use it because they aren't connected to the internet.

"Building a big web browser … will give you accolades and everything else, but that's something my mother cannot use or my grandmother in the village cannot use," he said.

As founder and CEO of the software company Oasis WebSoft, Owusu wants to create products that would be more relevant to his community. For example, in Ghana, like other African countries, mobile phones are relatively cheap and nearly everyone has one.

Where is he taking his talent now and what are his future plans as a young leader? Listen to the audio above to find out.

Don't have access to Sound Cloud? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

"YALI Voices Podcast: Raindolf Owusu"
[MUSIC PLAYING]

♪ Yes we can. Sure we can. ♪
♪ Change the World. ♪

MACON PHILLIPS: Welcome Young African Leaders. This is the YALI Voices Podcast – a place to share some of the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network. My name is Macon Phillips, and I'm really glad you've joined us today. Don't forget to subscribe to this podcast. Just visit YALI.state.gov to stay up to date on all things YALI.

I recently had the chance to sit down with Raindolf Owusu. As the creator of Africa's first web browser, he's already an accomplished software developer and entrepreneur in Ghana. He's the founder and CEO of Oasis WebSoft, a software company, partially focused on creating mobile phone applications to help diagnose and address healthcare issues for Africans.

Raindolf had a lot of really valuable insight on the future of technology in Africa and what it takes to be a modern leader. It's really no wonder he's been called the "Mark Zuckerberg of Africa." So I hope you enjoy this interview as much as I did. We're going to cut now to my conversation with Raindolf Owusu.

Raindolf, it's great to have you here. Thanks for joining us.

RAINDOLF OWUSU: Thank you so much, and great to have you for this interview. Thank you.

MR. PHILLIPS: I know you've had a pretty great career so far. It's still early on in your career.

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: But looking forward to hearing a little bit about that, certainly your perspective on technology in Africa –

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: – and where you think things are going. But let's try to take it back a little bit. You've made your career in large part on the internet –

MR. OWUSU: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: – and sort of doing all of that. What was the first time you ever touched a computer?

MR. OWUSU: Yeah, so my dad got us a computer when I was about 10 years old. He bought it for my older siblings. So we, the younger ones, weren't allowed to touch it. So I have five other siblings. So late at night when they sleep, I just jump on the computer and see what's happening. And one night, I ended up deleting everything on the computer because I needed some space. And I got the beating of my life because at first they didn't know I touched the computer, and now they got to know I deleted everything. So that was pretty much my experience with computers.

MR. PHILLIPS: [LAUGHING] That's not a really auspicious beginning, man.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah. But that got me interested in computers because I realized it was such a big device then, somewhere in 2001 or 2002, and, you know, it did so many different things. I could play games with the computer. I could use Microsoft Word and things like that. And, over time, it gave me a lot to think about.

MR. PHILLIPS: So when you were in secondary school, when you look back on yourself as a student, were you always sort of tracking towards the computer nerd programmer, spending all your free time on that, or was it something that you were aware of but kind of came back to as you developed your own career?

MR. OWUSU: No, it has always been there. I had interest in computers. I remember when I was about 13-14. I used to be called "the computer man" in the neighborhood because I knew so much about computers, and most of them were self-taught because I'm always on the internet and finding new things. So during secondary school, I was a visual arts student instead of business. I had a lot of interest in business. So I wasn't so much interested in schoolwork. So I spent most of my time at the internet café.

MR. PHILLIPS: Well, there's, though, a certain school of thought – I think Steve Jobs from Apple would be probably the most well-known example of this – that the sort of intersection of liberal arts or visual arts and engineering is exactly where you want to be if you are creating consumer products. [CROSSTALK] So maybe as you think about your own career, what, if any, was the influence from that time spent studying visual arts?

MR. OWUSU: Oh, I – even now, I'm happy I did visual arts because now I'm building products – I am

building products that I want people to interact with, easy to use. It should be visually appealing because I get to work with colors, I get to work with building software, mobile applications. And all these things have to do with design. So, yeah. They always intersect. Visual arts is a pretty much [INAUDIBLE] technology.

MR. PHILLIPS: So, a lot of people that I talk to have, you know, this interest in entrepreneurship, and they have this interest in starting a business and that sort of thing. And you're someone who's done that.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Successfully, right?

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: So let's start with where you just talked about, your time in school, your visual arts school, and you're not really going to class as much –

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: – because you're not as engaged.

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: How did you go from there to actually taking the plunge to start a business? Walk us through the steps it takes to go from being a student, maybe not even a super motivated student, to an entrepreneur.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah, it's – I think I had [INAUDIBLE] when I got to the university because I did computer science at Methodist University. So I got to the university and my first day, I enjoyed programming. I was programming and it was very fun. But later on, I realized the schoolwork was becoming so much. And there was a lot happening outside Ghana. So, just like, you hear of a 16-year-old kid who built an app and it's being purchased by Yahoo for $13 million. And this is a simple app that I could design.

So, the first thing I did was to start – at first it wasn't a company in my head. I was just building a product that I would let people utilize. So I was building products, and later on, over time, I started reading more about this whole technology, and I realized it's actually a business. You have to read more than just technology. You have to actually set up a company. You have to work with people.

So it didn't just happen overnight. I failed a lot actually. My first product became well-known, but to me became a failure. That's called Anansi Web Browser. That is to date being claimed as Africa's first web browser. So I built a web browser because I wanted to show the world Africa could build technology, because anybody who thinks of Africa thinks of an agricultural nation where we are producing oil or we are producing minerals and things like that. But I pretty much wanted to show the world technology is also [CROSSTALK].

MR. PHILLIPS: You wanted to show the world and then you went up and built Africa's first web browser. Why do you think it's a failure?

MR. OWUSU: Pretty much because I didn't customize it for it to be useful in my environment. And that was one learning step I took after building that. So after building the web browser, I decided to build things that would work really well in Africa. So, to me personally, but I believe it gave a lot of people inspiration that if Raindolf also could build a web browser. So personally, I think that is my personal feeling, but overall, looking at me building a web browser in 2011, it was such a big accomplishment, so.

MR. PHILLIPS: So then where did that take you? What did you learn from that in terms of your next step?

MR. OWUSU: So my next step was to look into the market, realize there was a high penetration rate of mobile devices. So everybody had a smartphone because android phones are very cheap. So they had smartphones but they didn't really know it was a smartphone. So I'm like, "Hey, how can we leverage on that and built people the products they want to have?" So we built a product like Bisa, where – Bisa, it means "ask" in Twi. Twi is our local dialect in Ghana. And what we are doing is we are connecting people from home to doctors. So when you have your mobile up and you are a young person and you are seeing some symptoms around your private parts – because we live in a very conservative society, people are scared to go to doctors. So we are giving you a chance to use your phone to take a screenshot and anonymously send it to a doctor and he will get back to you with feedback and let you know you need to see a doctor as soon as possible because this looks like that or you have to do this in order to get rid of that. So we were connecting the public to doctors. And this is very relevant to the community than building a big web browser where it will give you accolade and everything else, but that's something my mother cannot use or my grandmother in the village cannot use.

MR. PHILLIPS: It's so interesting to hear about that use case, because one of the things that I run into when we are talking about the digital aspect of YALI, the online aspect of YALI, is this sense of the digital divide.

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: The fact that there isn't internet everywhere here, and in fact, there's not internet in a lot of places at all, and on top of that, there is sort of a digital illiteracy.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: But it would seem to me that this product that you are rolling out, which is trying to extend health care to at-risk, disconnected regions would almost by definition be targeted at people who –

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: – aren't familiar with the internet, aren't necessarily connected with the internet.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: So, how do you square that circle? How do you reconcile the fact that you're in a region where connectivity is tough, and sometimes using computers or smartphones or connected devices can be a little bit difficult with this need to make sure that these services are utilized?

MR. OWUSU: Yeah, so I always attribute the kind of work I do to the fact that I'm actually on ground zero. I'm where everything is happening. So when I'm rolling out a technology like Bisa, I have to think about every part of Ghana. I don't just need to think about Accra. Accra is just a small piece of the whole Ghana. So there's somebody who is in Sirigu in maybe the northern region where the only time he or she gets close to technology is the radio or maybe a Nokia [INAUDIBLE] that does not have app features or anything. So when we are building a product, we build high-end for people like myself, who have been to school, literate people. And we build something using like an IVR, an Interactive Voice Response, where – with any mobile device. It doesn't have to be smart. You just dial a short code and someone will talk to you in a local language, a response system.

So, we are building technology for high-end people, and we build a stripped-down version for people without access to that IT infrastructure. And we get to do that because here on the ground, we know how things like this work in different parts of the country.

MR. PHILLIPS: And so, as someone who's studying this closely and has a business that really depends on it, give me the forecast to where you think Ghana is going in terms of technology, and to the extent you can, Africa generally. As we think about our own efforts, our nonprofits we want to start, our businesses we want to start, how is technology changing Africa?

MR. OWUSU: Yeah, that's a good question. I think technology at first was something most people were scared about, if you read the history of technology in Africa, where people had big computers in their offices and they never used it. But now we've seen a change, and mobile phones have led that revolution. At one point, we had so many mobile phones in Africa than even telephone devices in the U.S. or something, right? And that stems to how mobile phones revolutionized this bit.

And one thing people are getting to understand in all sectors in business in maybe Ghana is technology is a backbone. Healthcare needs technology. Entertainment needs technology – even education. So I think in the next five years, you'd see distance learning or e-learning taking shape in schools. And once that this becomes a norm, it will be something everybody would have to accept in any industry, whether agriculture, because now we have small farmers that are using SMSs to receive weather forecasts. So technology is actually taking shape step by step, but then it will take a while and a lot of education.

So in Ghana perspective, I think the next five years would see a lot of innovations. Some of us are spearheading it in healthcare. I want to see other people doing it in agriculture, people doing it in education, and so on and so forth.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah. That's interesting though because I haven't heard someone answer it with the sort of first point, and I think I agree, perhaps the most fundamental point being its impact on education.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Because, you know, all these other things build on having a literate, knowledgeable workforce. When we talk about civic engagement, people have to understand the world. When we talk about new economies, people have to have these skills. And when you think about the current state of education systems in a lot of countries in Africa, it's not good, the idea that you could actually bring in these online courses and bring in tech-driven curricula could have a profound

impact on where things are heading. So it's a really interesting point you make.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: So where are you heading? What's your next business? You know, you've already started some successful businesses, and it seems like the latest one is doing really great work around healthcare.

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: What do you daydream about? What do you want to work on moving forward?

MR. OWUSU: Oh, so I think I've fallen in love with the healthcare sector, and – because besides getting very popular, it's becoming very impactful in Ghana. I'm looking at ways to enter into other markets, other West African markets like Côte d'Ivoire, where Bisa will not only support Ghanaian languages, but will also support French and maybe expand to other African countries.

So the next focus – and a few days ago, we had a small forum with my team where we are discussing how we can move the technology into other areas of the whole healthcare system, you know, because recordkeeping is very important. But we don't take it seriously in this part of the world, where you go to a hospital and you are given your folder to take home. That is very terrible; you can just lose the folder. You know, we need like a digital cloud system that can house all your information, so no matter who the doctor is, once you come to his room, he looks at your ID, he can just pull up your healthcare information. And it will help for them to continuously understand your ailment or anything else.

MR. PHILLIPS: A few other questions I have for you. You mentioned earlier that you were at a forum for your team.

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: And I'm curious. As someone who's gone from being, it sounds like, the younger kid in the family, right?

MR. OWUSU: Yep. [LAUGHING] Yeah, I'm the youngest male, yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Of how many?

MR. OWUSU: I have two other brothers and three other sisters.

MR. PHILLIPS: Alright, three other sisters?

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Oh my goodness. You're well-loved growing up, I'm sure, right?

MR. OWUSU: [LAUGHING]

MR. PHILLIPS: So, you're one of the young kids in the family, and now you're running an organization.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: What have you learned along the way about management and about leadership? I mean, what do you think has made you effective at leading other people?

MR. OWUSU: Yeah, I think it's because I don't see myself as a leader in the team, but as a team player. And I'm going to explain that. Because I'm a trained software engineer. If I come up with a project and we are working on it, I actually need a software development team. So I get to write the code with them. So when you are working with a team and they know they are part of the process, they don't really feel left out.

So that has attributed to the success of our project, you know, because I don't become your typical leader where I tell you to do this or do that, but I actually work with you, so if you have any problem, you can easily walk up to – and even my office is an open office, so you can easily walk up to my table and say, "Hey, I'm having problems with this code," or "I'm trying to market this to this client and I'm not getting it." So I think being a team player is very important. And the fact that I continuously mentor them. Any time they have any challenge, they easily walk up to me and I'm open to listening and offer my advice. And I even tell them to explore, you know, other avenues of solving problems. You know, it's not just your work at the office, but then, hey, we live in a very diverse society. So if there are problems you see, you can bring it on board and let's see how best we can all work together. So I think being a team player has actually contributed to my success as a leader.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Are there things you do every day or routines you do every week that you feel like have made you a more effective leader or more effective person in terms of your goals?

MR. OWUSU: I think reading. I read 30 minutes every day, whether it is news articles or a book. And I like to read things outside what I'm doing. So you won't find me reading a book about technology. You'd find me reading a book about a politician or a religion or something.

MR. PHILLIPS: What's on your Kindle or on your bookshelf these days? What would you recommend to people?

MR. OWUSU: I think How to Influence People. It's an interesting book. And I read a lot of autobiographies. So these days I'm reading about Kenneth Kaunda. He used to be the President of [INAUDIBLE] – Zambia. I read a lot of autobiographies.

MR. PHILLIPS: And what would you say – if you had to sum up your reading so far on him – has been the sort of takeaway?

MR. OWUSU: I think he had to make hard choices and he was – you know, religion in Africa is very big, so he was juggling between how to become a Christian and how to make hard choices when it came to dealing with rebels and things like that. Should he arm the soldiers to go and fight the rebels? Or he should be relaxed for the rebels to take over certain regions? So, yeah, I think – [LAUGHING].

MR. PHILLIPS: Hard choices.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah, hard choices. And being a leader is all about making hard choices, so you should

always be ready for that.

MR. PHILLIPS: So, the last one is more turning the tables because we've been asking you a lot of questions. If you could ask Barack Obama a question, what would you want to know?

MR. OWUSU: Ahh [LAUGHING] If Obama is sitting – President Barack Obama is sitting here, I want to know what's next after the Presidency and if he would be more involved in issues in Africa. So I would want to know what his plan for Africa would be after 2016.

MR. PHILLIPS: I don't know the answer to that, but my hunch is it will involve something having to do with Africa. I was speaking earlier about this. I got a different question and what is very clear to me is that Africa is very much in the President's heart and so are young leaders.

So, for everyone out there on the YALI Network listening to this, I think there's – it's hard to imagine a future where Barack Obama is not somehow involved with these issues and on this continent. So, the future is bright, not least of which because of the young leaders who are tuning in right now. And we want to thank all of you for joining us today on the YALI Podcast. Raindolf, I've really enjoyed our conversation.

MR. OWUSU: Thank you, Macon.

MR. PHILLIPS: Thanks for making time.

MR. OWUSU: You're welcome.

MR. PHILLIPS: Have a great day.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

MR. PHILLIPS: What's really great about Raindolf is how committed he is to mentoring. He sees the value in sharing ideas and moving everyone forward. I also love how he practices the idea of failing forward. It's the notion that even when things don't work out for you, you can still learn from the experience and immediately apply those lessons to your next project.

So I want to thank Raindolf for sitting down and sharing his story with us. If you'd like to get more info about Raindolf, check out OasisWebSoft.com where you can connect with him and get more information on his projects.

Thanks so much for listening and make sure to subscribe so you don't miss any of the upcoming interviews with other young African leaders. Join the YALI Network at YALI.state.gov and be part of something bigger.

Our theme music is "E Go Happen" by Grace Jerry, produced by the Presidential Precinct. The YALI Voices Podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State, and is part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. government.

Thanks everyone.